On Self-Forgetting:

Receptivity and the Inhuman Encounter in the Modernist Moment

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English
and the Designated Emphasis
in Critical Theory
in the
Graduate Division of the
University of California, Berkeley

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Fall 2016
Abstract

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The site of this study is the zone of indistinction between the human and the object. Looking to the writings of Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka, and Virginia Woolf, this dissertation offers reflections on various attempts to let go of the self (qua human) as the cardinal point of reference for value—whether epistemic, aesthetic, economic, or otherwise. Both forget and the German counterpart vergeßen are composed of a prefix that rebuts a stem, meaning “to get,” “to grasp,” “to seize.” Self-forgetting names a range of heterogenous practices, not always located in the field of intentionality, which involve losing hold of the self or loosening the grip of possession over what is proper to the I.

Distinct from post-structuralist critiques of the subject, these modernist experiments in self-forgetting are animated by an effort to refuse or improvise a momentary reprieve from the imperatives of anthropocentrism. My dissertation follows, in other words, thinkers who regard de-subjectivation as related intimately to the capacity to imagine an otherwise to the primacy of the human. In addition to calling into question the masculinist thrust of Enlightenment ideals of self-determination, these writers prompt a reconsideration of receptivity as a (sometimes non-volitional) faculty that helps to negotiate the threshold between anthropos and the inhuman. Newly imagined as a form of praxis, receptivity discomposes commitments to aesthetic autonomy, as well as to the fortified individual that is its subjective analogue. These visions of the human as decidedly non-sovereign—and taken aside from the scene of assertion over the object-world—comprise a forceful rejoinder to capitalist modernity’s legitimation of (epistemic) violence against nature, so as to serve the ends of productive enterprise.

The writings of Walter Benjamin act as the north star of this research. The introduction delineates anthroponarcissism as a practico-theoretical problem in relation to which self-forgetting may be thought of—though not exhaustively so—as a dialectical response. In contrast to theorists who conceptualize the nonhuman within a framework of sovereign decision, this study attends to authors who envision the decreation of circuits of reflexivity—material and psychic—that consolidate the human (subject) in its identity, at the expense of the object-world.
Chapter One, “When Things Suddenly Speak,” throws light on a filament that binds Benjamin’s early philosophy of language to his late childhood memoirs. Across these two works and throughout his thinking on mimesis, Benjamin revises philosophical accounts of the epistemic encounter with the object, so as to emphasize the possibility of subjective expropriation during potentially arresting moments when language emanates from the world of things. The second chapter suggests that Benjamin’s unfinished ideas about “empathy with the commodity” contain the promise of resisting anthroponarcissitic closure, to which Marxist theories of reification are prone. Through his engagements with lyric poetry, Benjamin makes space within historical materialism for the emergence of a perspective of the thing. He acknowledges a principle of animation within the commodified world that is irreducible to human labor, in part by cultivating a hermeneutics that is receptive to rather than intolerant of figures of literary animation. His work on allegory, I argue further, endeavors to disarticulate the ontological category of thinghood from a condition of degradation that is intensified by capitalism’s subsumption of the object-world under the law of price. Drawing upon Benjamin’s insight that allegorical production entails a violence against objects inflicted with significance from without, Chapter Three examines how Kafka’s animal parables frustrate the very operations of allegoresis that they set into motion. The suspension of allegory’s achievement—or, the way in which his ontologically indeterminate creatures cannot be resolved into a higher, anthropic order of signification (a delivered message, if you will)—generates the possibility for an attentiveness to the inhuman that would ordinarily seem antithetical to genres of literary instruction. At variance, too, with the inscription of the inhuman within the framework of political decisionism, Kafka’s fiction tends to the fragility and often remarkable contingency of the boundary between human and nonhuman—not only as a conceptual insight regarding the uncanny supplementarity of what is sloughed off from the essence of humanitas, only to make its return in the form of a haunting, but also through the narration of the lived experience of those who cannot maintain themselves in human form. Revisiting the novel that Erich Auerbach singles out as exemplary of the inward turn, Chapter Four reads Woolf’s To the Lighthouse as a work that is not only engaged with problematics of consciousness and memory but is also concerned with the ontological precarity of the object-world. In the aberrant middle section of the novel, titled “Time Passes,” Woolf develops a practice of writing in absentia—a form of narration that evacuates human consciousness, without rising to omniscience. Within this section, in which the Ramsay family takes leave of the house, Woolf presents a world in which the active subject of consciousness and the inert, affectable object cease momentarily to be the primary representational coordinates for parsing existence.
for my parents
and for Zeus
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This writing has made its way—only—in being moved by many.

The ideas that, here, have found a life on the page have derived their vitality from the currents of friendship. This manuscript owes its existence to Jane Gregory, a most remarkable editor, who has led me, time and again, into the space of non-knowing where things feel most true.

I wish to thank my committee for seeing this project through its many iterations and shapes—all while listening with an attentiveness and force of insight that guided me toward the questions I hoped but did not always know how to ask. Wendy Brown’s acuity—the way in which she meets the opacities of the contemporary moment with a rare balance of intellectual rigor and generosity—has been absolutely formative for my engagement with historical materialism. From the dance-floor to the swimming-hole, Anne-Lise François has, wherever we happen to be, shared with me the subtle movements of her intelligence, which have made a lasting impression on the very fabric of my thought. Without her gentle coercion, scarcely would anything have been written. Elizabeth Abel read and read and read—tirelessly, with astonishing incisiveness and patience—even those things that were half-formed and barely audible, until, transformed as they were by the prescience of her response, they started to attain their first moments of solidity. The time spent in conversation with Judith Butler has been wholly and utterly sustaining—as a locus of hope and as a gift as inexhaustible as reading itself.

Throughout these years at Berkeley, Lynn Xu’s friendship has returned me—daily, like the untimely reminder that is the tide—to the capaciousness of the image and to that difficult and listless question of what writing can, what might it be? Afternoons on the Mosswood courts with Layla Forrest-White I count as some of my most fulfilled moments. I am grateful for Rei Terada’s singular intelligence, which has taught me, among other things, how to “want the problem back.” From Amanda Armstrong, I have learned much more than can be adequately named; persistently, she showed me how theory finds new fullness when drawn into those spaces of care in which the political opens itself to the potential for its own radical transformation. Much of this work was kept afloat by the grace of elective affinities: Jocelyn Saidenberg, my root; Munira Lokhandwala and Emi Kane, whose interminable antics never fail to incite the belly to laughter; Amy Huber, my twin brother; Lisa Barftai, whose gifted ear proved a steady resource for counsel; and Josh Permenter, who keeps my life riven with music. One will also find in this study the traces of lasting and invaluable conversations with Samia Rahimtoola, Kathryn Crim, Erin Trapp, and Ingrid Diran.

A word of gratitude for the readers who opened up a space of play and curiosity without which this dissertation would have been unfathomable: the witches have been unwaveringly thoughtful and encouraging in their engagements with my work, my scribbles, my reticences. Alexandria Wright knew precisely when to walk me to the edge of a labyrinth; and her wisdom about the epistemological-ontological slope has been nothing short of a touchstone for this inquiry. Over the course of uncountable moons, Suzanne Herrera Li Puma has taken up whatever little debris I have placed before her with a delicate intelligence that is as perceptive as it is disarming. Much of my writing aspires simply to return anew what has already been passed from one of her radiant
collections—as an unexpected offering—briefly into my hand.

This project owes much to the incomparable warmth and acumen of Elizabeth Abel’s dissertation writing group, which included Erin Greer, Rasheed Tazudeen, Anna Abramson, and Jocelyn Rodal. A special thanks to Gina Patnaik and Irene Yoon, whose unflagging support and laughter buoyed and fortified the whole of this project, even in those moments when it fell most deeply into shadow. Jack Norton, Ori Burton, Sarah Ihmoud, and Jacob Kang-Brown were readers with whom sharing work was reminiscent of touching one’s feet to the earth. I would like to thank, too, the participants of Judith Butler’s 2016 dissertation group—especially Simona Schneider, Alexandria Wright, Maya Kronfeld, and Philip Gerard, who helped me work through chapters on Benjamin, as they were still in gestation. Of the members of the Berkeley faculty who have variously lent their support to my research, I would like especially to thank Charlie Altieri, Steven Goldsmith, Colleen Lye, Celeste Langan, Kristin Hanson, Suzanne Guerlac, Joanna Picciotto, and Julia Bryan-Wilson.

Fellowships sponsored by Berkeley’s department of English and the AAUW provided the time and bread to write.

And finally, this passage in and through writing is indebted to my family, whose disparate languages brought me errantly to my very first questions.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AP  Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project
    Edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2002)

CC  The Complete Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno
    Edited by Henri Lonitz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001)

GS1-7 Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. 1-7
       (Frankfurt: Surhkamp Verlag, 1972-1999)

SW 1-4 Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vols. 1-4
       Edited by Michael Jennings and Marcus Bullock

[If I write better German than most writers of my generation, it is thanks largely to twenty years’ observance of one little rule: never use the word “I” except in letters.]

— Walter Benjamin, Berliner Chronik

What I mean is words
Turn mysteriously against those who use them
Hello says the apple
Both of us were object.

—Jack Spicer, “Sheep Trails Are Fateful to Strangers”
OVERTURE

Vielleicht—ich frage nur—vielleicht geht die Dichtung, wie die Kunst, mit einem selbstvergessenen Ich zu jenem Unheimlichen und Fremden, und setzt sich—doch wo? doch an welchem Ort? doch womit? doch als was?—wieder frei?

[Maybe—I’m only asking—poetry, like art, moves with a self-forgotten I, to the uncanny and the strange, and sets itself—but where? in what place? with what? as what?—once more free?]

— Paul Celan, “Der Meridian”

This study considers how subjects are formed, not only in a struggle for mutual recognition but also through a process of differentiation from diverse forms of thinghood. The emergence of the I may certainly depend on the address of another—a you—who helps to constitute a field of intersubjectivity, which, perhaps in unexpected ways, acts as the condition of possibility for the work of individuation. But the subject’s consolidation within a field of sociality is also syncopated by the pull of the inhuman—or, by what is often grammatically marked by the it.

What passes under the broad canopy of this impersonal personal pronoun is admittedly given over to diffusion. It has long been a holding ground for the animal, the child, the commodity, the secret, the natural, all that falls to the wayside of a bifurcated gender system, the unconscious foreigner residing within. Much as the “object” of epistemology can bring almost anything into the crosshairs of specification, it is the labile placeholder, the changeable guesthouse, for what is left indeterminate for reasons of neglect, affection, or incertitude. Sometimes, thinghood is conceptualized as what is left behind when someone is actualized as a person, or in other instances, as what becomes of subjectivity when it bottoms out. In both cases, thinghood is a differential of the subject that cannot be wholly assimilated to the time of subjective experience, to the trajectory of development charted by the bildung, or even by the temporality of work. The subject’s (non)relation to thinghood is the site of a distinction that is often omitted from the field of differences that it makes legible, under the rubric of relationally.

These pages make an inquiry into how the inhuman is discursively positioned as a sounding board that generates the reflexivity of human consciousness and founds the subject’s power by being being brought under it—as fetishized property, as an object of knowledge possessed, or as what can be instrumentalized without jeopardizing good conscience. But this dissertation is just as much about writers who decline such feats of differentiation or find them to be in some way untenable. Theirs are literatures that forego looking upon thinghood merely as a determination of the human or as a repository for the detritus that the subject sheds, often unsuccessfully, in order to step forth as someone who can say I. In doing so, they risk the interruption or even undoing of the subject’s formation. And they potentially bring any theory of subjectivity to the limit of its elasticity.

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The forgetting of the self that has been constituted by its sovereignty over what is inhuman may not pass so easily into perceptibility or into language—not least because the who of speech is discomposed, time’s anchor loosed from scale. Something of this disorientation can be heard in the epigraph above, in which Celan’s proposition no sooner sets into motion a self-forgotten I than the whole sentence breaks open into short, cavernous questions, which flit by and rustle the very rudiments of place and being. To go on—but where, as what?

The authors gathered together in this study may be thought of as a brigade of Odradekian Penelopes, whose decrative work sets loose or lets fray what binds the subject to its coherence, insofar as the latter is secured by a triumph of the will or a feat of language that repels or occludes the inhuman. Self-forgetting is not a concept but a process—one which unsettles the locus of anthropic intentionality that is ordinarily believed to lie at the heart of “practice” and is the centrifugal center from which conceptual work emanates. What is at issue, here, is not the death of the subject as a theoretical proposition, which exposes how the ruse of presence is generated by trans-individual structures of language and deflates both cogito and character into the mere habit of saying I. The hope, rather, lies in illuminating diverse forms of self-abandon as experiments in resisting the supremacy of the anthropic horizon. Together, these visions of ontic fragility form a chrysalis, lined impermanently with images of an often tenuous otherwise to capitalist modernity’s commitment to productivism and its pursuit of progress through the domination of inhuman nature.

Three aspects of this argument are woven together. First, I contend that just as within any given culture there are a set of practices—discursive, bodily, economic, aesthetic—that enable subjects to be come into being, we can likewise specify what forms of de-subjectivation are possible, as well as what repertoires of play are available for the often phantastic work of the self’s de-constitution. As we will see, de-subjectivation is not limited to the parameters established by conventional accounts of dehumanization, objectification, or the sublime encounter with alterity. Each of these analytics centers on the notion of a potentially injurious fall from human dignity or on the drama of self-finitude experienced in the encounter with fearsome nature, unrepresentable. Even as they give an account of how a particular individual or group of people may feel their (bodily) integrity to be compromised, the fundamental distinction between subjectivity and inhumanity is left intact, as if stable. Distinctness from and supremacy over thinghood remain the subjective ideal toward which both restitution and the strength of reason strive. It is possible, however, to critique such underlying presumptions about the affiliation of thinghood with degradation—and to ask, for instance, why objecthood is so often assumed to be a bad object, whose extrojection is required for the process of adequating to humanity. What I wish to disclose, moreover, are forms of de-subjectivation that are not fully assimilable into the dialectics of subject-formation, even though they might be initiated there.

Second, I argue that unhinging desubjectivation from the aspiration for sovereignty requires a reconsideration of receptivity as a critical and aesthetic resource. For good reason, receptivity has fallen into some disrepute among feminists who refuse the naturalization of pliancy and passivity as fixed elements of the feminine. Newly imagined, however, as a form of praxis in modernism, receptivity has political implications that have yet to be grasped. These, moreover, cannot be fully encompassed by romantic problematices of beauty and aesthetic education, which feature as an essential component of the practico-theoretical work of self-cultivation the calibration of the proper proportion between free, determining activity and the passive absorption of phenomena. I consider how writers turn to the quasi-volitional faculty to be affected (Kant’s definition) in an attempt to
discompose cultural commitments to aesthetic autonomy, as well as to the fortified individual that is its subjective analogue. I attend, too, to the ways in which the activation or regulation of receptivity becomes a way to negotiate the threshold between humanity and the inhuman, where the latter carries the double meaning of what is non-anthropic and what is more pointedly judged to be barbaric.

Third, On Self-Forgetting asks why narrating the experience of the inhuman has been unbearable for philosophy; and how, in response, writers have cultivated new modes of representing what carries on in the barrios of subjectivity. Understanding that to speak of the inhuman in its positivity often relapses into anthropic projection, they nevertheless seek to open literature to the perspective and speech of what is not intelligible as human. In many instances, this requires the dis-composition of genres and tropes oriented around consciousness—or, as in Benjamin’s restrained use of the pronoun I, an improvisation of literary enactments of self-divestment. To be clear, these writers do not effect a surgical subtraction or abstract negation of subjectivity, in order to leave behind as a residue, an unmeditated, objective plane of scientific truth. Rather, they draw forth the phenomena of the human’s disappearance—along with moments when self-assertion over the world of things is set aside—as a way to dissolve the primacy of the anthropic subject.

Taken together, the chapters within this volume present a constellation of self-forgetting as it manifests across a range of discursive contexts in the twentieth century. Consequently, what falls on either side of self-forgetting’s hyphen necessarily shifts with every reading—referring, for instance, to the psyche’s drift from the bind of self-preservation or at other moments to the autobiographical I that is shaken out of its constancy when interpellated by an other who is un-recognizable as human. The introduction situates self-forgetting in relation to what, in the modernist moment, acts as its dialectical counterpart: anthropoarcissism, or the tendency toward (discursive) closure around the human and the circuits of reflexivity that help to constitute and maintain its identity. The first chapter reflects on Walter Benjamin’s recurring visions of subjective expropriation as they appear across his writings, from his early linguistic philosophy to his late childhood memoirs. His reconceptualization of the (autobiographical, philosophical, and experiential) subject as non-sovereign—that is, as potentially taken by surprise and undone by the inhuman other—proves vital to his critique of objecthood as a condition of muteness and degradation. Drawing from Benjamin’s literary engagements with allegory and lyric address, chapter two traces Benjamin’s effort to break through the anthropocentric orientation of Marxist accounts of commodity fetishism, which attribute the animacy of things exclusively to an expenditure of human labor that is obscured by capitalist relations of production. Chapter three considers how Franz Kafka’s attentiveness to the creaturely manifests in the magnetic field generated by two features of his animal stories: first, the suspension of allegory’s capacity to make use of the inhuman to secure a transcendental signified and second, the often unexpected narration of an address, emanating from that which cannot be recollected into human form. The dissertation closes with Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, whose experiment in evacuating human character from the heart of the stream-of-consciousness novel reworks philosophical and painterly conceits of the spectatorial subject’s excision in realism.
INTRODUCTION:
RECEPTIVITY AND THE DECREATION OF ANTHROPONARCISSISM

Trusting fool, how futile to woo a fleeting phantom! You’ll never grasp
it. Turn away and your love will have vanished. The shape now haunting your sight is
only a wraith, a reflection consisting of nothing; there with you when you arrived, here
now, and there with you when you decide to go—if ever you can go!

— Ovid’s Metamorphoses, from “Echo and Narcissus”

The Nonhuman as Wish-Image

The category of the nonhuman is as empty and replete as that of the human to which it is opposed. Empty, because it is entirely incapable of grasping the internal differentiations that would make such a general term meaningful, either conceptually or politically. Full, because, as impoverished a notion as it may be, the “nonhuman” commands at this hour an indexical power that points to a real impoverishment—one that is characteristic of a social order founded on human exceptionalism and, accordingly, interprets as a salient distinction “everything other than humanity.” The hollowness of the “nonhuman” is partially overcome whenever it makes a bid to be regarded less as a linguistic determination whose referent is an established, natural organization of the world’s beings into a matrix of species and races and more modestly as the vessel of a wish. That is, the “nonhuman” only contravenes its own subsumption to epistemic violence whenever it is mobilized in a way that undermines the conditions under which such a bankrupt category could not only emerge but also appear to be invested with significance.

In a word: the turn to the nonhuman will only bear fruit at the very moment when the category is itself abolished, or at the very least, becomes as troubled and archaic as the anthropological classification of the “primitive.” The “nonhuman,” to recall an image of Walter Benjamin’s, does not come forward through a process of exposure or even by being drawn into relief from its counterpart: rather, only when the husk is set aflame will it achieve its most brilliant degree of illumination (GS2 211).

It Must Go

The inaugural sentence of Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” narrates the transformation of an able-bodied working man into a verminous insect [Ungeziefer] whose incapacity to be productive exposes him to unanticipated forms of injury. By the time the story begins, it seems that Gregor’s metamorphosis has already taken place as something of a missed experience for both reader and protagonist. He awakes, and with no explanation, he finds himself changed utterly, lying on his back, having become a foreign body. What we witness subsequently is the bewildering process of reckoning with an absent, past event whose cause and reason remain unavailable, even while it structures the desolation of everything that follows, up until Gregor’s last breath. The narrative, whose temporality is that of

the postlapsarian afterward, recounts a fall from an existence as a traveling salesman to a captive Untier [monstrous animal]—a transfiguration that is present only indirectly, in the chronicle of its aftermath.

Yet, in another sense, Gregor’s metamorphosis is not fully realized until quite late in the text, in the third to the last chapter, when for the very first time his family refers to him in the third person, no longer as er [he] but as es—an uncertain pronoun that, as we will see, marks a new form of vulnerability that coincides with Gregor’s wavering between objecthood and inhumanity:


[I won’t utter my brother’s name in the presence of this creature, and so all I say is: we must try to get rid of it. We’ve tried to look after it and to put up with it as far as is humanly possible, and I don’t think anyone could reproach us in the slightest.]²

And just moments later:

»Weg muß es«, rief die Schwester, »das ist das einzige Mittel, Vater…. Wenn es Gregor wäre, er hätte längst eingesesehen, daß ein Zusammenleben von Menschen mit einem solchen Tier nicht möglich ist, und wäre freiwillig fortgegangen. Wir hätten dann keinen Bruder, aber könnten weiter leben und sein Andenken in Ehren halten. So aber verfolgt uns dieses Tier, vertreibt die Zimmerherren, will offenbar die ganze Wohnung einnehmen und uns auf der Gasse übernachten lassen.«

[“It must go,” cried Gregor’s sister, “that’s the only solution, Father…. If this were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that human beings can’t live with such a creature, and he’d have gone away on his own accord. Then we wouldn’t have any brother, but we’d be able to go on living and keep his memory in honor. As it is, this creature persecutes us, drives away our lodgers, obviously wants the whole apartment to himself and would have us all sleep in the gutter.”]³

These judgments are all the harsher because pronounced by his sister, who has until this point acted as Gregor’s primary caregiver and previously was the only one who rose to defend him from the lethal aggression of their father.

So much is compressed into this turning point, but what I wish to mark first and foremost is that the grammatical downgrading of Gregor coincides with the mandate for his elimination. In the very same utterance in which he is verbally identified as es, he is also marked as an object of necessary expulsion. Though until this point he has been living on, embodied, as some would say, improperly—as an insect within the house of his human father—he remains throughout that time

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³ *Metamorphosis*, 42; *Erzählungen*, 41.
still identifiable as Gregor, or he who would be disavowed. This moment marks a decisive shift in
which his already compromised status as one condemned to a state of proximate exile is
compromised further, in that he is linguistically marked as having lost human form and becomes an
organism that no longer has a gendered pronoun on which to buoy embodied experience.

In this same scene, his kinship with his family is revoked, along with his entitlement to a proper
name. The sudden reversal of familial care into murderousness is synchronized, too, with Grete’s
recasting of Gregor as the perpetrator within an upended persecutory fantasy. She portrays him as
the monstrous and animalized agent of hostility, the enemy of the household, to whom she
attributes her own displaced intention to drive her kin out of the space of belonging. Before
recriminating Gregor (who now, and for the remainder of the text, will vacillate between es and er
when appearing in the speech of others), she preemptively exculpates her family of any guilt that
would attach to Gregor’s forcible removal. She places them beyond reproach, reasoning aloud that
they have done all that is humanly possible. These pointed references to what is within the bounds
of the human are not only a dig at her renounced brother and at the inhuman body that is a spectral
reminder of terminated kinship, but also perform the double function of accentuating the Samsas’
distance from the creaturely and articulating the biopolitical limitations of sociality and coexistence.

How, we may ask, do we understand the relationship between inhumanity and legitimized violence
that emerges in this scene? Does the desire to eliminate Gregor require, as an instrument of
rationalization, a linguistic act of depersonalization? Or does his extermination in some sense follow
from his identification as an it, as if his removal were a necessary consequence of this marker? Does
the pronominal shift prepare for or anticipate a violent act—or, rather, does it license such an act?
Or, does Gregor’s dis-appellation constitute a violation in itself, a violation that simultaneously
operates as a death warrant? Alternatively, one may ask whether, as Grete’s remarks seem to
suggest, the very definition of violence is changeable and largely contingent upon an onto-
grammatical distinction, such that what counts as violence against persons may be, when directed at
things, immune from condemnation, un-prosecutable, beyond the (moral) law? If, as Barbara
Johnson suggests, there is an asymptotic limit between persons and things, what takes place when
such a limit is traversed—or when the geometry of relation is suddenly reconfigured? And, finally, if
we consider, as she does, Benveniste’s claim that someone who neither addresses nor is addressed—
someone like Gregor—functions as a thing, is it possible to narrate or ask after the experience of
living on, of doing so in a vacuum in which one can neither issue speech nor be drawn out by it?4

What Now, Then?

What I find especially intriguing about Gregor’s metamorphosis is that a period of dilution, which
constitutes the majority of the text, separates his dehumanization from the later moment of his de-
subjectivation. These are, of course, intertwined processes, but Kafka makes it possible to consider
them as distinct. The story’s central conceit gives dehumanization a vividly concrete, if not literal,
dimension that lends itself to or might even be said to call for allegorical reading. Certainly,
Gregor’s dramatically altered state of embodiment—his uncountable legs, his armored back, the
secretions he deposits on his bedroom ceiling and door, his inability to vocalize the sounds of
human speech, his foreign diet, his gestures that are legible only as threats—inspires disgust and

avoidance among those closest to him. Indeed, it seems that even apart from any harm inflicted by his family, the very infrastructure of the household—the narrow width of the doors, for instance—proves injurious to the sheer fact of his existence.

Despite being taxing, his un-becoming human—his physical transformation, which over time translates into a more profound difference in species-being—is nonetheless survivable. Once, however, he is denied his brotherhood, cut off from the economy of (familial) recognition, presumed not to be able to understand their communication (even though, of course, he does), and demoted in status into a generic *it* that has no other imaginable fate than to be cast off, Gregor is not long for the world. “What now, then?” he asks himself, after listening to this conversation in which he is believed to be unable to participate. He dies within the same paragraph. Gregor is given no funeral and his remains are disposed of by the cleaning woman who reports that the stuff [*Zeug*] has been cleared away, as if his corpse were any other household debris.

Where “The Metamorphosis” is concerned, dehumanization is just the beginning—the text’s inaugural situation. The narrative emphasis, in other words, seems to fall less on moving swiftly toward an emancipatory trajectory whose endgame is human freedom than on the scarcely narratable experience of living-on in a state of ontological insecurity, from which there is no clear path of recovery.

This problem is no doubt intensified by the family that locks him in his room while blaming him for not leaving of his own accord. But their treatment of their partially repudiated kin, as we witness any time a guest steps foot in the house, is mediated by broader social norms that sanction doing away with or doing nothing to preserve unproductive, inhuman life. Though his mother holds out the hope that her son will one day change back into his former self and will become once again a subject who can be integrated into the normative orders of family and work, the text does not seek resolution in the restoration of Gregor to a life of meaningful employment and human dignity. The faintness of any prospect of redemption by means of Gregor’s re-assimilation into an egalitarian civil society—premised on the notion of human equality—may be taken as an indication of a disturbing fatalism. That the text fails to re-humanize Gregor—for instance, by absorbing his difference into a program of tolerance—allows certain questions to be raised that might otherwise be made minor in the context of humanist paradigms of inquiry.

Under what conditions is heightened corporeal vulnerability something that is effectively inherent in being inhuman? Why do violence and extermination seem the only viable alternatives for those who cannot be stabilized (through recognition) as human subjects? Is it redundant to speak of the objectification of those entities that are already considered to belong to the inhuman world? Is there any language for the thing that is somehow an other to the other of dialectics?

“The Metamorphosis” is often read as a fable of human alienation whose break with realism strikes upon the social realities of Western modernity all the more acutely. Kafka’s narrative, I would like to suggest, works also and somewhat differently to draw apart dehumanization from de-subjectivation—processes that are often taken to be sealed together, in a rough equivalence. When Gregor is newly incarnated as an *Ungeziefer*, he is not from the start necessarily death-bound, even though he becomes so. It is precisely the interim between these states—between being other than human and becoming the nameless inhuman whose life is marked for disposal and, finally, becoming a piece of detritus among the world of things—that Kafka brings into the space of representation.
Although ultimately in this text, life as what is judged to be insufficiently human becomes unlivable, the contingency of the inhuman’s death sentence is the locus of a radical, still unconsummated hope in the past.

The Anthropocene’s Transcendental Subject

If the full meaning of the “nonhuman” rests neither in its descriptive force nor in its explanatory power within discourses of scientific rationality, one might ask what cultural work it performs and how. In a sense, the overly capacious signifier complements rhetorics of the Anthropocene that posit human activity as singular and qualitatively changed. For the first time, the argument goes, the productive power of the human species is able to intervene beyond the stratum of social history. The pen presses through, as it were, ink leaving its mark more deeply than the page of world history, so as to alter the very script of the geological order—possibly in an irrevocable way. The Anthropocene is the name for a moment of self-consciousness, when what was practically set into motion by industrialization is belatedly acknowledged, consolidated into a proper name, and raised to the status of a geo-historical epoch, which is then positioned as the culminating point of a linear continuum.5 In a different register, one might say that the Anthropocene marks a time when “second nature” is consummated more completely than Lukács or Hegel before him could have ever imagined, in that there remains nothing on the surface of the planet that is not produced by human praxis.6

This panoramic, narrative Anthropocene features humankind as a newly self-ordained sovereign whose actions are now tantamount to “the great forces of Nature.”7 This rise to power is not an event within a sequence of time, but is instead said to have inaugurated a new temporality by breaking the planet away from its own “natural” geological order. The signature of this newest era reprises, though on a planetary scale, a sentiment expressed by versions of philosophical idealism that allegedly have become obsolete, even though they, too, were carried out in the name of science. In this newest iteration, the “Earth system” is substituted for the notion of totality. And the transcendental subject stirred into existence by Kant’s Copernican revolution survives, reincarnated and aggrandized as a unified “geophysical force”—“humanity”—which, in Crutzen’s words, is increasingly “becoming a self-conscious active agent in the operation of its own life support system.”8

The circuit of self-reflexivity, in other words, is closing into a tighter completion in such a way that humanity becomes the causal source behind the natural world by which it is affected. In this vision of the human as a “new telluric force which in power and universality may be compared to the greater forces of the earth,” the shadow of absolute spirit returns as a bygone premonition.9 But a cardinal difference from nineteenth-century idealist visions in which Subject ultimately overcomes

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8 Ibid., 619.
9 Ibid., 615. Crutzen et al. are here quoting Antonio Stoppani, who proclaimed the existence of the Anthropozoic Era in 1873.
its potentially wounding difference from (natural) Substance lies in the fact that presently, this proposition is advanced and is attempted to be proven quantitatively, wholly on empirical grounds.

Discourses of the Anthropocene train one to see, behind every natural disaster, the invisible hand of human action. Their primary thesis—that the essence of the current geological epoch is the fact of being “dominated by human activity”—suggests that what was once merely the aspirational horizon of the Enlightenment must now be acknowledged as the defining material condition of existence—the state of affairs, according to science. While such an optic makes legible an abstract notion of the species as a protagonist who may be brought to trial in its own court, as it were, the singling out of the human reinstates a practico-theoretical paradigm in which the anthropos is qualitatively distinguished from the rest of nature, which is said to be modified to such an extent that it is moved beyond its own “natural” range of variability.

The rhetoric of the Anthropocene intensifies the tendency toward universality already inherent in species-thinking. Not only does it become difficult, within its ambit, to keep at the forefront how the “human activities” in question are differentially enacted and their effects unevenly distributed, along lines that often coincide with the global division of labor. But additionally, the human cannot be imagined as anything other than a determining agent of reality. Even if raised in order to be shown as newly compromised, the stark divide between the human and everything else—one which echoes Goethe’s gloss of the subject-object distinction as one that separates the individual from “all that is without him”—is preserved as the framework for comprehending ecology.10

The Anthropocene meta-narrative, with its clear dramatic arc and its spare, two-character cast, may be, with the simplified clarity of the catastrophic teleology it sketches, rhetorically effective in both conveying a sense of urgency and emphasizing the role of human praxis as a transformative power, not only of certain regions but of the total environment. But, one may nonetheless ask: Must the call to ecological responsibility require us to posit a universal subject of action, embedded on a stagist trajectory of self-awareness? Is the only way to address global warming to reinstate—as the center of ecological thought and praxis—an abstract conception of the human against which nature’s “normal” behavior can be measured? Is the analytic of the Anthropocene able to conceive of humankind in any modality other than that of its newly won sovereignty over the natural world, which has become so potent that it risks undermining itself? Can such a discourse conceptualize the

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10 Such an outlook drastically limits the range of imaginable responses to the threat of environmental collapse. After presenting a synoptic history beginning with the advent of agriculture and ending with the unprecedented rise in carbon emissions that began after WWII, Crutzen and his co-authors conclude by outlining three possible orientations toward the critical state of the global ecosystem: “business-as-usual”; the mitigation of human influence on the environment so as to avoid changes that are “difficult to control”; and geo-engineering—a catchall term for various attempts to reverse greenhouse warming by means of large-scale ecological interventions. For many policymakers and scientists, to reconsider the primacy of anthropic, productive activity is less conceivable than the numerous and peculiar, if not bizarre, proposals to bring solar radiation under technological control. Some of these geo-engineering projects, which Naomi Klein discusses in her recent book on climate change, This Changes Everything, would have sounded in another era like they had been sprung from someone suffering from a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts. They include dimming the sun; “brightening” the clouds and enhancing their reflective capacity by spraying water into the sky from a fleet of boats; fertilizing the oceans with massive quantities of iron with the intent of drawing carbon out of the atmosphere; draping the desert with massive white sheets to accelerate cooling; and, to mention the most favored by capital investment so far, imitating the effect of volcanic eruptions by injecting sulfites into the air that block sunlight. Naomi Klein mentions the uneven fallout of these projects in her chapter “The Solution to Pollution Is... Pollution?” in This Changes Everything (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).
earth as something other than a life support system for humans? Is there anything occluded by a general theory, which relates all observable phenomena to questions about the extent to which they may be attributed to human enterprise? And given the nearly exclusive focus on the anthropic modification of nature, with an eye toward identifying the “tipping points” at which the planet will no longer be able to support human populations, does the Anthropocene leave room to consider the other side of the dialectical mediation—to ask, for instance, if nature in turn intervenes into the conception of the human in ways that exceed the circular movement of the latter’s experience of its own reflexivity?

In sum, the concept of the Anthropocene, as well as many of the emerging discourses in the humanities that are influenced by it, continue to be organized around the exceptionalism of the *anthropos*—a figure presumed to be identifiable, in its continuity, from the Pleistocene through to the contemporary moment. Such a premise generates, as a byproduct of singling out the human as a privileged actor of geological world-history, the category of “nature” or the “nonhuman,” whose meaning is indirectly constituted by what is left out by the empirico-conceptual construction of the species. Not only does such a framework make it difficult consider that what is called “the human” may indeed be a part of nature; but the comparison, and necessarily the fundamental separation, of "human impact" from "natural variability”—the crux of what the Anthropocene paradigm seeks to assess—is treated as a historical invariant. Certainly, the anthropogenic transformation of ecological processes can fluctuate over time, as data has shown; but within such a critical paradigm, the theoretical bifurcation between “man” and world, which structures such empirical inquiry cannot be called into question.\(^\text{11}\)

In order to clear space for alternative footpaths of thought, this study examines the larger problem of which such recent conceptual tendencies are a part—namely, anthroponarcissism, a term whose dimensions this introduction will unfold. In keeping with this effort, the dissertation eschews the conventional usage of the term “nonhuman,” in the context of the conventional opposition between the human and the nonhuman, insofar as the latter is believed to refer neutrally to a class of existents when, more often the case, such a signer carries with it an ethos of human exceptionalism from whose cloth it is cut. The “inhuman” is not so much a substitute or a surrogate for the “nonhuman,” but acts differently as a linguistic provocation—with all its connotations of monstrosity and barbarity—to consider how the discernment and specification of what is outside of the *anthropos* is inseparable from determinations of human value, even while not wholly reducible to them.

As a touchstone for understanding how self-forgetting might act as a counter-current to formations of anthroponarcissism, I would like briefly to draw into relief certain elements of Frankfurt School thought, which may seem to share or anticipate Anthropocene-era concerns about the practical and conceptual domination of the natural world by human industry. Despite this common ground, one finds, especially in the work of Adorno and Benjamin, a markedly different effort, not only to acknowledge the devastation brought about by a civilized humanity that raises itself up by mastering nature, but also to push against the legitimacy of the human, along with other notions—personality,

character, subject, legal personhood— with which it has been affiliated. It is not, then, that they summon humanity into action in order to take collective responsibility for its own ecological predicament which, once made conscious, can be redressed on awakened humanity’s own terms. Rather, the germ contained within certain writings of the Frankfurt School is the radical sense that the very institution of the “human” would have to be dissolved, so long as it remains complicit in the work of domination. There is no easy, readily available vocabulary for such a position, which should not be mistaken for variations of anti-humanism developed by post-structuralist theory. Sometimes, Adorno finds an indirect and implicit way to reject modern notions of humanity by suggesting that it has yet to be achieved. “We cannot anticipate the concept of the right human being,” he writes in Negative Dialectics, “but it would be nothing like the person, that consecrated duplicate of self-preservation.”

Perhaps even more than this characteristic evocation of an unspecified future in which political fulfillment is located—a negative image that emerges from a critical disaffection with existing social institutions—the present inquiry draws from a different response to the problem, identified within this literature as Naturbeherrschung [“domination of nature”], which appears in the closing line of Benjamin’s 1934 commentary on Kafka: “Whether man or horse is no longer so important, if only the burden is lifted from the back” (GS 2: 438; SW 2: 817). Whereas the vagueness inherent in contemporary vocabularies of the “nonhuman” is the result of a coarse opposition in which what is other to the human is relegated to the dustbin of supplementarity, in this remark a form of indifference to ontological distinctions clears the way to a possible emancipation—one that does not depend on first stabilizing entities on a grid of intelligibility, which holds the definitive answer to the question of who/what someone/thing is. In this view, the prospect of freedom is not the exclusive prerogative of the human—either to consummate as its own essence or to mete out selectively. And while this orientation might be judged impracticable, it breaks through the fetishization of species as a discourse of knowledge to which ethical claims must be subordinated.

In the Shadow of the Anthropological Machine

Some may be inclined to draw this study of the inhuman into the ambit of Giorgio Agamben’s The Open, which remains more singularly fixed on the production and regulation of the borderline between human and animal. This dyadic configuration, I will suggest, is not sufficient for grasping the inhuman, either as a biopolitical or an aesthetic problem.

Agamben’s account of animality contends that the ontological integrity of the human is produced by an exclusion of certain forms of life from the space of the political. “The anthropological machine” is the name Agamben gives to the trans-historical mechanism that generates distinctions between animal and human by inserting a hiatus between them. The inclusion of man into humanitas is neither self-present nor final, since the content of humanity empties out into a repeated process of articulation, which cannot conjure any fixed essence but can only specify the interval separating humankind from other life. This operation occurs first internally within the individual but can

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subsequently be directed outward, into a communal direction, so as to drive away the barbarian, the slave, and the foreigner into figurations of \textit{zoon}.\footnote{Giorgio Agamben, \textit{The Open: Man and Animal}, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Hereafter cited parenthetically as \textit{O}.}

My present inquiry shares in Agamben’s recognition that biopower—which in Foucault’s inaugural theorization involves a (human) rationality that pertains to the management of (human) populations—cannot be adequately grasped without attending to the coordinates of the inhuman, which remain largely invisible within the modern political landscape. I also share in the general conviction—one that comes to the fore in the late work of Derrida—that where the animal and the human are concerned, there is no there there. Such referents, though they make a bid to be taken as markers of ontological substance, are mediated by historical processes of segregation, even if in certain senses they are quasi-autonomous from such contingencies.

A species is not a fact, but a determination. Despite Darwin’s insight that species are hardly self-contained constants passively awaiting taxonomic identification, such presumptions are being revived and reinstated as the plane of objectivity—the reality principle—on which, after a prolonged fit of constructivism, the humanities is called upon to ground itself anew. The biological definition of “species” that predominates as the gold standard of this signifier—namely, a group of organisms delimited by their capacity for “successful” reproductive futurity—is scarcely free from the arbitrariness of human cognition. To query the universalism of species—as a privileged unit of organization that was developed by western discourses of scientific rationality and within cultures that placed a premium on productivity—is neither to advocate for a hubristic disregard of material reality (often metonymically represented by the incontrovertibility of genetic code), nor to lapse into what some might allege to be a position fastened to social constructionism to the point of falling blind to what may be irreducible to the cultural.

The point, rather, is to break through the eclipse that this narrow conception of species casts over all other modes of conceiving of relationality. As even the most cursory glance at social practices that have found reprieve from or were not yet scarred by Enlightenment dogma, relationality is not always restricted to what passes under the name of the human. Species-thinking, in other words, is a schema of intelligibility, a technic for the dissection of life. Moreover, it makes thanato-political decisions seem possible and even reasonable. Any attempt to forge an animal or environmental ethics on this basis lapses into the lethal reactivation of sovereign power.

The problem is more familiar to longer-standing arguments about when, if ever, state or extra-juridical violence can be legitimized. But the same damaging framework resurfaces in debates that fixate on the decision about what species are worthy of protection and rights—or, from the perspective of the consumer-as-micro-sovereign-of-the-\textit{aikos} (household), what species one will or will not eat—which is implicitly a death sentence to the rest, who are un-spared by the protective grace of exception. In unsealing this limited notion of “species” from the increasingly forgotten sense of “species”—as more simply a “group”—it becomes possible to consider that there is more than one way to understand what constitutes creatures’ sense of their kind.

Although I hold in common with Agamben an effort to dislodge the notion of species from its adamantine fixity, my own account parts ways with his theoretical and historical aims. \textit{The Open}, one
may recall, presents a broad range of readings, bookended by Aristotle and Foucault, with Heidegger’s boredom seated at the archive’s heart, and the notion of the “end of history” looming over it all. Noting how Aristotle’s designation of “nutritive life” establishes a backdrop against which higher animals stand out with distinction, he concludes that the metaphysics of the Greeks and the origin of Western politics was from the start already a biopolitics (O 80). Such a characteristic suggestion, which Sedgwick might have identified as an exemplary instance of “strong” theory, yields much to thought; but at the same time, it risks collapsing into an abstract generality, which homogenizes quite various processes of regulating life, turning them all into a mere instance of a theoretical construction—namely, the anthropological machine. This study maintains a tighter historical orbit around the modernist moment and its satellites in order to wrest these questions from timelessness and to consider more closely how the articulations of inhumanity are mediated and revised by literary forms and theoretical endeavors of a time shaped by the emergent forces of capitalist modernity.

More significant, however, than these differences in historical scope, is the divergence in the theoretical coordinates that this dissertation seeks to bring to light. The identification of the anthropological machine is, in short, but the first step. The analysis of politico-ontological caesuras that, like landmines, influence how questions of value can be navigated cannot, I argue, be encompassed by the bifurcating divisions, emphasized by Agamben, between the human and the animal, and the complementary separation of the political individual from disaggregated populations of bare life. The landscape on which the human finds its footing is certainly more populated. In an attempt to offer a fuller sense of this scene, the following pages undertake an account of thinghood as it dovetails with the inhuman—a rarely consistent category that sometimes, as in Descartes’s thought, coincides with animality, but much more often remains elusive, if not exterior, to delimited ontological zones that could be located in the zone of the living. Thinghood may share intimacy with, but is ultimately other to, even the minimal state of bare life, in which continuously man and beast are said to flicker into each other. Paradoxically, thinghood is at once shadow to animality and that which is sometimes tasked with holding it.

On Non-Sovereignty

The other principal query I would put to Agamben’s work has to do with the central place he grants to sovereignty—understood as the concentrated source of power, which pronounces, sometimes sotto voce, the cuts in the ontological plane that are subsequently to be administered. My dissent from a theoretical paradigm anchored by a conception of sovereignty is not, as we will see, restricted to Agamben’s reading of biopower but pertains, too, to diverse, contemporary attempts—on the part of Bruno Latour, object-oriented ontologists, and new materialists, to name a few—to reconceptualize the nonhuman by breaking with dialectical thought.

According to Agamben’s account, the (implicitly human) sovereign will is the author of the articulations and re-articulations of man’s [sic] distinction from the animal. And even after political

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15 Bill Brown contends that things are irreducible to objects in that they constitute, temporally, the before and after of the object; as what is not yet formed into an object, “things” designate both a latency and excess. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
sovereignty has waned as a mode of governance, giving way to modern state-regimes that organize both the neglect and care of populations, for Agamben an act of sovereign intervention remains the productive origin of the boundary delineating the valued kingdom of human life from the merely vegetable outerlands that can be consigned to abandonment. While undoubtedly, the structure of exception commands productive power in constituting the space of the political, I do wonder if there is not some distortion involved whenever tunnel vision is directed toward sovereign decision and the specter of an efficacious will as the seat and source of political determinations. This theoretical bias, which sets analysis into motion with an already constituted and concentrated font of power in place rather than with a consideration of how such power might be formed and maintained through a process that requires interminable reiteration, reveals itself first and foremost in the readings Agamben carries out. With the exception of Benjamin, in whose work Agamben’s work and On Self-Forgetting find the most common ground, Agamben concentrates primarily on scenes of sovereign deliberation: men, writing, contemplating, as if alone, whether the tick has a world or is worldless (Heidegger); whether the ape requires a different Latinate genus than that of the homo sapien (Linnaeus); or whether plants will be admitted to Paradise (Thomas Aquinas, who rules no, since in the state of resurrection, all natural functions will remain “idle and empty”) (O 32).

Man deliberates, man decides: this is the supreme fiction in which The Open remains entrenched even as it proposes to subject to critique the discursive separation of human and animal. Implicitly, what is being enacted here is an analogy between sovereign and authorial decision. Scrutiny of the construction of bare life, in short, comes at the cost of resurrecting the philosopher-king.

But doesn’t even the sovereign have an unconscious? Or rather, is his power broad enough to exempt him from all, externally and within, that might derail or move the resoluteness of his own intentionality? No decision belongs fully to the sovereign who makes it. Additional objections may be raised, of course—that the performance of sovereignty in these texts belies impotence; or that any such incarnation of the self-present will, any representation of a unified seat and source of action, is ultimately the effect of extra-subjective structures, not least of which is language.

Rather than reinstate sovereignty in the form of authorship, I am interested in breaking through the presumption—and here I borrow from an insight of Lauren Berlant—that political and individual sovereignty are necessarily joined in an air-tight mimetic relation. Agamben’s nearly exclusive investment in sovereign decision, which is by definition unilateral, effectively writes out the dissensus that might confront every incarnation of the anthropological machine, every founding exclusion. In other words, he is able to recognize that the interval between natural life and the polis, between bios and zoe—and even the fringe distinctions between stones and animals that are judged to be “poor” in the world—must be articulated and re-articulated. The decision, which is the instantiation of finality, must itself be renewed. And while he does show how metaphysics is hardly apolitical but can constitute the ontological field through which sovereign or biopolitical violence is enacted, he offers no account of why these resolute, once-and-for-all stipulations about what counts as human must be perpetually refreshed and, implicitly, either lose their staying power or come undone. In his account, it seems as if there were no effort to fill these caesuras with song or noise,

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to load them until the point of demolition, to occupy them, to address them, to harness their silence and in so doing transform it, or to live within the strange capaciousness of their uncertainty.

Even as they seek to examine how certain onto-political grammars are established—noting, in particular, what is codified in the often heavily policed channel between the *it* and the congress of personal pronouns constituted by *I, you, we, she, us,* and *he*—the following chapters are threaded through with the question of how articulations of the inhuman are not only re-articulated, but also dis-articulated. To ask this question is necessarily to ask how sovereign power is eroded, how even an absolute state of exception may be breached, and how, even as certain walls may not come down, certain sounds are still able to travel over it, and certain resources of life able to burrow beneath.

As the preceding paragraph intimated, the institution of political sovereignty is not perfectly mirrored in the sovereign individual, of whom Kant offers a canonical portrait in his definition of a person as one who is “subject to no other laws than those he gives to himself.”

Certainly, the two may be joined by their participation in a shared fantasy. But much as an ego-ideal models what a subject might attempt to approximate, without ever resolving that approximation into identity, and just as that deviation is in some sense what constitutes the imago in the first place, the cultural fantasy of political sovereignty may guide but by no means fully determine the various expressions of sovereignty as a mode of subjectivity. I am interested in works in which the mirror breaks down—is broken—as it were.

Put otherwise, one of the primary aims of this dissertation is to investigate what happens when non-sovereignty becomes the point of departure for considering the inhuman encounter. My inquiry does not proceed, in other words, by beginning with the constituted power of the human subject and subsequently asking what of the inhuman can be apprehended, determined, or used: i.e., what can I know of it; what should I name it; should it be spared and conserved, sacrificed and eaten, or placed on a list of the endangered; what meaning might I instill in it; what cultural or physical work can I compel it do; how should I train it; how do I keep it out; how intelligent is it; how should I represent it; what can I get in exchange for it; what of myself, of us, can I project upon it; should I relate to it as companion or enemy; how is it produced theoretically as a category of being? By the time any of these queries can be raised, much of the *I* who is doing the asking—perhaps on behalf of a broader community of subjects—has already been consolidated. An epistemological, moral, or instrumental position has been set in place. To varying degrees, each of these queries reinstates the framework of decisionism as the unquestioned ground of inquiry.

I would like to underscore that what is ruinously foreclosed—even by the best intentioned of these efforts—is any resistance to the presumption that the inhuman is and will continue to be under the submission of political sovereignty—whether authorial, popular, or despotic. This tendency is easier to detect in certain discourses, like those of biological conservation or animal rights, in which the closed matrix of necropolitical choices is brought to the fore. But in other instances, this political-philosophical paradigm is much more difficult to identify, especially when operating within a project whose most visible claim is to reject anthropocentrism.

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For instance, in two of the most prominent strains of posthumanism—actor-network theory and object-oriented ontology—scholars have advocated variously for a “parliament of things” (Latour); a “flat ontology” (Landa); and a “democracy of objects” (Levi Bryant). This rhetoric evinces a resurgence of the Enlightenment program of instituting abstract, formal equality as the universal norm, but on an unprecedented scale that would nominally level all existents, and not just human beings, into a common plane of being, which in turn is consolidated into a unitary governing body. The collapse of the Great Chain of Being into a single, homogenized order of immanence is brought about by repackaging the old unit of measure, “the individual”—purifying it of its overtly humanist undertones—and reissuing it in the form of the “thing” or “object,” which can be applied to anything or anyone indiscriminately. The result, as Timothy Morton suggests, speaking of the radical deflation precipitated by object-oriented ontology, is a realization that the “being of a paper cup is as profound as mine.” It is not coincidental that the cultural currency of such visions has inflated dramatically at a time when, putatively, for the sake of resolving conflicts stemming from global inequalities, a standardized form of Western, political democracy is being exported and impressed upon those with contrasting beliefs about politico-economic subjectivity and collective organization.

Were he present to witness this contemporary revival of Heideggerianism, Adorno might have contended that any ontology that declares there are only objects is effectively an intellectual endorsement of the reification brought about by capitalism, whose global expansion is total and totalizing of what there is and, worse, of what we can imagine there to be. The attitude that all existents are things among other things—newly dignified as a first philosophy—is not an overcoming of the separation of subject and object, but a whitewashing of it. The case with which the “human” is gladly sent off to slum it in the field of “interobjectivity”—as an object whose ontological value is weighted equally with all others—is not only a dissimulation of the fact that the very conception of objecthood is a mediated product of human cognition but also causes this program of equalization to revert into the negative image of its declared rival: namely, a bad caricature of idealism, whose protagonist is the aggrandized Subject who incorporates all that is other to it, and ends up turning everything into more of itself. In both cases, total inclusion betokens an intolerance to difference. Object-oriented ontology distinguishes itself from its counterpart, however, by binding this intolerance to a potent fantasy that the (philosophical) subject can simply walk away from its own history of violence and find retreat on the other side it has for so long ghettoized. Such a worldview effectively preempts claims targeted against social inequality while absolving itself of having to show aggression toward what it suppresses; it is able to accomplish this because it instates equality as something that does not involve any process of adjudication but rather as something that has already been established, foundationally, as the condition of being, into which a small coterie has insight. The epistemological division of subject-object that they, along with speculative realists, seek simply to do away with by rejecting all correlationism beginning with Kant, is a damaged and damaging framework, to be sure. Although what plays out from these polarizing coordinates has historically been rigged in favor of the subject (of modern liberalism), the stubbornness of the hyphen that separates them—this scar tissue—at least retains the memory that the divisions enforced by thought may have made certain forms of

20 Timothy Morton, Hyperobjects (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 17.
knowledge and techne possible, but at the great expense of enduring problems that have been inscribed, as in Kafka’s “Penal Colony,” into the socius and thus cannot simply be willed away—not even by thought.

Constituting Amodernity

Pursuing a path that diverges from the ahistoricity of object-oriented ontology, the work of Latour has yielded the insight that modernity is constituted by a separation between nature and culture, which in turn structures a division of labor between scientific and political practices of representation. He advocates for a retrospective recognition that, since its inception, this founding polarization has always existed alongside the hybridization of its two sterilized elements. Resolutely, Latour declines to understand this state of affairs as one of dialectical antagonism. Instead of imagining that modernity can be superseded by a temporal afterward—by inaugurating, for instance, a post-modern era—he promotes the acknowledgement that modernity, which engenders the cleft between human and nonhuman, does not need to be overturned because it has effectively never been accomplished. This perception does not involve a negation of the Enlightenment so much as it makes available a space of the “amodern,” which takes into account both the “modern Constitution,” as well as the “populations of hybrids” that the latter suppresses while also inadvertently stimulating into proliferation.21 From this vantage, the task, in his words, becomes to sort rather than to unveil, to add to existing networks of actors rather than to take away from them.

Latour introduces the terminology of “quasi-objects” and “quasi-subjects” to refer of the assemblages within “nonmodern” worlds, which span the intermediary zone between nature and culture. The perennial question may be raised once more about the identity of the collective subject who is solicited—the we that Latour draws toward his realization and seeks to reconstitute as part of an apparently more inclusive “parliament of things.” It is not merely a relativist complaint to note that the statement “we have never been modern” comes to mean differently when applied or taken up by those who have long been figured as inadequate to or as a threat against the legacy of European modernity. Nature and culture, moreover, cannot be reconciled by the sheer force of a combinatory operation that posits, as its output, a third term like “naturecultures” or “quasi-objects/subjects.” What is concerning is not that the dualism is left severely un-metabolized, as they often are in states of hybridity, but that a compromise formation is being instituted as the practical and theoretical panacea, as if what lies on either side of the Spaltung could simply sutured together in a neologism, a new construct.

Latour would surely take issue with the suggestion that quasi-objects are a product of theoretical engineering alone. But even if they not purely a feat of subjective invention, his ability to stabilize such amorphous entities depends on a prior spatialization of the opposition between nature and culture and the demarcation of a territory between them in which such quasi-objects can be located. He conceptualizes this intermediary zone between two outposts—which, significantly, are left entirely intact—as a “Middle Kingdom, as vast as China and as little known.”22 This orientalist hiccup, along with the repeated references to a large, obscure region that has existed all along, populated by inhabitants that have hitherto been blacklisted from assimilation into the modern; this

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21 Latour, 47.
22 Ibid., 48.
expansive field which he now brings out from darkness, names, delimits, and prepares for mapping, encouraging other surveyors to partake in the project so that in the future all existents can be constituted in a single polity that draws nonhumans into the space of representation—is a tell of the logic of power that ballasts the broader argument. What is under scrutiny here is less the catachresis involved in attempting to locate certain operations of thought topographically, than the sense that underpinning this new space is an act of will.

I return now to my initial point that an act of sovereignty lies behind these theoretical enterprises, in which the human is nominally de-centered. They involve an absolute transformation of what already exists into a new world that supposedly is not subjectively determined. They seek, furthermore, to resolve the disjunction between human and nonhuman, society and nature, by constituting a unified plane of existence that can encompass them both—a consolidated territory in which there is no negation. Object-oriented ontology accomplishes this by collapsing the critical division between subject and object into the latter pole, making vanish the category that has historically supplied the generic, sterilized name for the party with the upper hand in a relation of domination. Enacting the theoretical counterpart of a characteristic expression of white guilt—namely, to insist, as if repeating the statement were simply enough, that we are all on the same footing—this evacuation of the subject hurriedly settles the question of culpability with an ontological declaration of equality that is temporally decontextualized. Actor-network theory, by contrast, does not fundamentally alter the bifurcated structure of being that modernity engenders, but institutes a third space that is maximalist insofar as it admits everything—past, present, future, uncle, marble, beaker, beast—into ever-widening assemblages, which then remain to be parsed.

Both the declaration of an ontological leveling and the suspension of the nature-culture division within an expanded liminal field attempt to eradicate the cleft between human and nonhuman by way of a unilateral decision, one that is extra-judicial, extra-processual. That is, none of these conceptual reorientations take place through historical transformations but presume to stand outside of it; a new order is advanced by fiat—to take effect immediately, with no foreseeable point of expiration. The decree that we are all objects now, or that we have always been nonmodern, issues from a (presumably nonsubjective) source of authority outside the field of existents, which that very authority constitutes in its freedom from any preordained ontological differentiation. As if preparing to grant a pardon, Latour suggests that if “we simply restore” the creative role of mediation to “all agents, exactly the same world composed of exactly the same entities ceases being modern and becomes what it has never ceased to be—that is, nonmodern.”

Versions of this line of thinking also surface in the new materialisms, named by Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, and Jane Bennett, insofar as they call for a reconceptualization of matter as no longer inert, but invested with productive capacities. What makes such efforts both radical and conservative is that they posit a sweeping egalitarianism, but do so by exercising an already constituted power, which disavows itself and its exceptional status by constructing the picture of an even ontological field, in which the powers of the human are no longer regarded as extraordinary or singularly potent. The human subject of sovereignty has not vanished, however; it has merely been taken off stage, as the authorizer of a space of equality.

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23 Ibid., 78.
Making the Nonhuman Productive Again

The mechanism for leveling what exists is the ascription of agency to the world of things. In order to do away with the dualistic ontology of Cartesian and Newtonian modernity, and thus, to disabuse humans of their monopolistic hold over efficacious action, they advocate for the recognition of the agentic capacities of nonhuman assemblages. All matter is invested with the ability to be regarded as an actant—or, as they repeat variously, as productive in its own right, as generative, lively, vibrant, constitutive, emergent, self-creative, immanently capable of self-transformation.

To see nonhumans as actors in their own right—albeit not always willful or exhibiting intentionality—is a step toward making newly audible the first part of the phrase *zoon politikon* and, more generally, pierces through the (Enlightenment) illusion that the inhuman realm—things, animals, machines, creaturely life—lies inertly, awaiting seizure or activation by human use. This gesture works to discompose the hierarchical structure that places self-determining humans above “brute” matter, but it leaves wholly untouched the related assumption about the valorization of productivity at the expense of other modalities of being. In a similar way that matter is elevated in status only by virtue of its capacity for productive activity, in system theory’s celebration of autopoiesis—the notion that a system generates and reproduces itself, while remaining essentially closed off to the environment—the figure of the autonomous subject rears up. 25

It is certainly worthwhile to contest a static paradigm in which (nonhuman) matter is thoughtlessly subordinated to the transformative will and whim of the human, and doubly subordinated insofar as that submission becomes defined as its essential feature. My fear, however, is that one of the prevailing responses to this disparity—which is encoded in the opposition between inert nature and self-moving culture—has the result of simply inducting all of the world’s elements into the distinctly human cult of productive activity. In other words, they aim to resolve, as they put it, problems stemming from the modern “ethos of subjectivist potency” by granting similar potency to the object, as if drawing it out from inactivity were enough to redeem it. 26 In doing so, the prejudice against passivity or non-action as legitimate modes of existence is implicitly perpetuated and left unexamined, as is the ideal of subjective strength and the structures that uphold it.

While energies are directed toward rescuing matter from the scandal of “mere” being, a monolithic axis dividing passivity and activity takes shape. The emphasis is then skewed in the direction of demonstrating how nonhuman matter must be regarded as an active force in its own right—and less toward a consideration of the ways in which spontaneous activity, itself an abstraction, is plural and expressed differentially and, moreover, is always interwoven with its opposite. Such a one-sided effort to extend the ambit of productive power—which includes the capacity to initiate or intervene into a chain of action (moral agency) or to exhibit the faculty of creativity (aesthetic agency)—preserves the structure of decision that authorizes nonhumans to be recognized as agents and leaves unexamined the problem of why subjective constitution has been affiliated with sovereignty over nature, as well as the question of how this bind might be forged out of existence. An analogy may be drawn between this theoretical gesture and the structure of long-awaited permission, in which

26 *New Materialisms*, 8.

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someone finally grants the authority for a power, long had by another but not expressed, to be exercised without punishment. A reassessment of the putative inertia of things, I argue, cannot be severed from a querying of the concentration of the powers of world-transformation within the province of the human subject.

In seeking to understand the link between human sovereignty and the extension of productivity that we have been tracing, the question of hermeneutics cannot be bypassed. In conceptually liberating matter from its caricature as merely recalcitrant, new materialists aim to re-describe objects and bodies as having a “positive, productive power of their own.”27 This critical reorientation, I wish to emphasize, is inseparable from the work of re-figuration; and so, literary analysis remains essential to such an undertaking. The critical task does not stop at paying heed to the newly mobilized regimens of metaphors and anthropomorphisms that are deployed in the constitution of the truth of the nonhuman’s alleged vibrancy. One can ask, further, whether such figurations ultimately double back into an act of human signification; and if they do not, if there are practices of reading and interpretation that could challenge such a view.

Critique’s End

What is partly at stake in the recent approaches to the nonhuman just mentioned—actor-network theory, systems theory, new materialisms, speculative realism and its subsidiary, object-oriented ontology—is the putative obsolescence of critique. To differing degrees, all of these new movements are predicated on the refusal of modern critical thought, whose inauguration is conventionally associated with the Kantian circumscription of philosophical investigation within the bounds of the cognitive schema of the universal human subject. Reactions against this tradition range from Latour’s polemical declaration that critique “died away long ago”28; Bennett’s explicit movement away from Adorno, Marx, and Hegel toward the materialisms of Deleuze, Democritus, Diderot, Spinoza, and Epicurus; to Quentin Meillasoux’s retreatment within a speculative, “ancestral realm,” a time before the advent of the species, and by his reasoning, a state in which truth is untethered from the correlation Kant proposes between the subject and the phenomenal world.29

There are two discrete aspects of this broader current against critique. The first has to do with the perceived inadequacy of the resources of critical and dialectical thought for meeting the demand, posed by the contemporary ecological crisis, to give new consideration to extra-human temporalities and material realities. The targets of disapproval have included the allegedly constructivist inclinations of post-structuralism and the longer standing dominance of the hermeneutics of suspicion, which are both faulted for resolving objects of study into the horizon of human language and the often invisible, yet nonetheless determining structures of social organization. In place of longstanding practices of symptomatic reading, some have called for a revival of alternative textual practices, like restrained description, surface reading, or a minimally interventionist practice of

Affect, ..., may what Critique other negative materialisms seems affective the observation, Doubtless, determined thought, certain “creative affirmation,” which promotes an ethos that is “more positive and constructive than critical or negative,”32; or, to mention another example, in Latour’s proclamation of the death of critique and his call to develop new methods of research that are “associated with more, not less, with multiplication, not subtraction,” with assembly rather than demystification, with proximity to matters of fact rather than withdrawal from them.33

As the depth-hermeneutics epitomized by Marxism and psychoanalysis have fallen into disfavor in certain quarters, critique is being re-cast as a force of sheer negativity.34 Two distinct aspects of the negative are composited into a single, distorted portrait. One element has to do with a practice of thought, which inquires into the limitations that help to constitute an object in question, and the other aspect describes a subjective disposition committed to sanctimonious pessimism, which is determined to winnow the abundance of the phenomenal world into a predictable litany of refusals. Critique appears to be locked in a bind in which it is either regarded as too insistent on hermeneutic productivity, in that it does not let appearances be but, through a process of exposure, transforms what a text makes apparent into a different order of significance—or, conversely, faulted for yielding too little, for being merely negative and incapable of advancing any positive claims about how methodological or practical advancement might be achieved. In light of this, perhaps Sedgwick’s question may be rephrased with a difference, in order to ask, what makes the merely negative so mere?

Doubtless, there have been critical traditions that have idealized the cardiac strength required of the work of negation, along with the subjective training that necessarily accompanies such an ideal, if one is ever to survive the occupation. But negation is hardly a monolithic operation and, though it may be easy to forget, it can enjoy an affective polyvalence that ranges more widely than the single-

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32 New Materialisms, 8.
note severity with which it is often imbued when conscripted into programs of self-fortification. Freud, for one, considered negation to be the first creative act, which suggests an effort that is not motivated by mistrust, but by play. There are, additionally, less imposing forms of negation, as Rei Terada suggests in Looking Away, which are hardly antithetical to pleasure, but instead open onto forms of philia that are neither predictable nor easy to codify within a normative economy of expected gratification or dissatisfaction.\(^35\)

Objections about questionable utility and single-mindedness are those with which critique has had to contend for some time and with an insistence that draws it into affiliation with the aesthetic, which scandalizes the question, “what is it good for?” What does seem new, however, is that this movement away from the critical is being posited as necessary for a turn toward the nonhuman—and toward the “real” with which the latter is often associated. To understand why the attempt to supersede humanism very often relapses into a reinvigoration of realist presumptions, it is helpful to recall that realism has long been a discourse oriented toward what is independent of the (human) mind and, furthermore, has treated that independence as though it did not express a relationship partly determined by cognition. The modernist convergence between literary, painterly, and philosophical variants of the realist conceit—which, I argue, revolves around the fantasized and represented absence of the experiential subject—will be taken up the final chapter. But for the moment, I will simply mark a reservation about how the nonhuman is often employed as a token or test-case of the real and how, moreover, such arguments perpetuate the peculiar presumption that what is not human is somehow more authentic by virtue of being unmediated by consciousness. The current fervor with which thinkers seek finally to arrive, or, as in speculative trends of thought, to make a leap at the real in an act of triumphal gratification, seems partly a reaction formation developed in response to post-structuralism’s hermeneutics of deferral. The point of the latter, however, was never the prohibition of satisfaction in itself nor the institution of a linguistic purgatory on the way to the final destination of a plane of reality that lay on representation’s other side. Rather, such reading practices worked to call into question the very structure of referentiality, conceptualized as an arrival at an exteriority of language. In this sense, the polemical statement that there is no outside of the text can be read less flatly as a brutal sentence to inescapable insularity than as an insistence that the question of mediation cannot be discarded once an act of signification seems to strike its referent.

This dissertation participates in a broader effort to query the view that criticality must be refused or left behind in order to address questions related to the nonhuman. An initial step in this direction may be made by recalling that critical theory is not reducible to the hermeneutics of suspicion, as is sometimes assumed. This becomes especially clear in Benjamin’s peculiar Platonism, which resolutely does not disparage the phenomenal world but seeks instead to illuminate it. Benjamin’s early vision of a literary criticism that could speak to the non-intentional truth of aesthetic works—that is, to ideas whose meaning lies neither in the subjective expression of the author nor in the vicissitudes of spectatorial response—underwent a distortion in De Man’s appropriation of Benjamin’s work on allegory. But, as we will see in Chapter 2, Benjamin’s literary engagements may be worth revisiting in the context of the contemporary debates just mentioned, especially as a recurring effort of his thought, from the Trauerspiel to the unfinished Arcades, is to give breath to a

form of theoretical work that throws light on truth neither at the expense of false consciousness nor of the objects that the allegorist makes use of for the production of meaning.

The Inhuman and the Limits of Critique

On Self-Forgetting may be distinguished from other works that have also drawn from the resources of critical thought to ask after what is other to the human subject. Three lines of inquiry stand out, as constituting the present framework within which the nonhuman has become legible. There are those arguments, like Derrida’s in The Animal That Therefore I Am, which examine how philosophers have sought to establish and maintain criteria for marking a distinction between human and nonhuman—for instance, on the basis of whether the animal is capable of response as opposed to mere reaction; or whether, as Levinas was quite unprepared to consider, the animal has a face. Second, various posthumanisms—like those of Haraway and Hayles, to name a few—consider how information networks and new technological mediations of life-processes alter existing conceptions of embodiment, sexuality, companionship, and subjectivity. Much of this research is informed by techno-scientific shifts of the post-war era, including the advent of cybernetics, modern genetics, and digital communication. Often drawing from earlier archives of the nineteenth century, scholars like Lisa Lowe and Saidiya Hartman have shown how the liberal subject of freedom and the categories of subhumanity that sustain it have been produced by racial subjection and administered in accordance with colonial divisions of labor. Together, such thinkers have helpfully shown how the dialectic of difference and sameness plays out in attempts to immunize humanism from its animal and racialized others, and requires reconfiguration in the face of cyborgs and other figures in which culture and nature are rendered indistinct.

Pursuing a somewhat different course, On Self-Forgetting turns to twentieth-century versions of critique and to the literary works that are inseparable from them in order to suggest that a ligature binds the inhuman and the non-sovereign subject. Rather than turning away from critique in order to posit the agency of the nonhuman, the following chapters explore why critical thought has often found it unbearable to narrate the experience of the inhuman object, while looking to writers and theorists who, beside themselves, venture to do so.

To ask this question is to inquire into the provocation that the inhuman introduces to the operations and rudiments of critique. Speaking, for the moment, in general terms, one might say that critique does not name any fixed discursive arrangement but rather designates a practice and a mode of questioning that is at once exterior to any theoretical or practical system but also able to enter into it, as it were, in order to draw into focus the contradictions that structure a system’s coherence and its governing limits of legibility. In its immanent form, critique is wholly dependent on what is heteronomous to it. As Adorno writes, such thought sets to work, decidedly within rather than outside its object, by “disclos[ing] each image as script. [Dialectic] teaches us to read from its

features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth.\footnote{39} Part of what is at stake in these methodological considerations is the enactment of dissent from a transcendental position—a position from which claims that are advanced issue from a plane that is extrinsic to the object of investigation.

One aspect of immanent critique seldom remarked upon is that something conditions its operation, or rather, sets it into motion, which is not internal to the object of study. Immanent critique, in other words, can never be fully immanent because the process depends on a prior act of selection, which is not determined by or contained within that which is to be critiqued. One might argue that whatever is taken up will potentially deliver some sense of the social totality of which it is a part. Nevertheless, much hangs on this initial object-choice, which like erotic attachments, may not be entirely volitional and at times may even be guided by an aspect of compulsion. Regardless of where the decision falls on the spectrum of volition, a discontinuity exists between the moment of selection and the enactment of critique, which are elements that cannot be resolved into to each other even while they may not be marked distinct.

One familiar way to pose the question would be to ask if something about the nonhuman, when taken up as an object of critique, repels or renders such a practice inappropriate. In the past, the endeavor of critique, from Kant to Foucault, has largely been directed toward institutions and discursive formations that are generated by and within human society, if not toward subjectivity more narrowly: “the work carried by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings,” as Foucault puts it in “What is Enlightenment?”\footnote{40} While critique may disclose how, for instance, a given text or social institution generates norms and rationalities that produce an ideation or ethos pertaining to the nonhuman (as pet, as kin, as money, as the beast within), a doubt arises about what critique would be able to say, if anything, about the nonhuman as an existent, irreducible to anthropic determination, even while it may effectively be under its yoke. Something of this quandary comes to the fore when one gives even the briefest consideration to the disregard that many cats often have for property lines that are legally enforced.

At this juncture, one could contend that the very split between the nonhuman as a notional versus an actual being could be reabsorbed into the analytics of discursive production: how, for instance, such a separation is encoded as a meaningful difference and how, more broadly, embodied materiality not only comes to be represented but also gives shape to the order of signification. Alternatively, one could read this dilemma as an instance of the generalized problem of the Other, whose unknowability is something neither to be overcome nor resolved into speech. But each in its own way, both of these paths leave unaddressed the specific shudder that the dialectics of identity and alterity undergo, when dislodged from an anthropocentric frame. A whole catalogue of definitions of the nonhuman as extra-rational, extra-linguistic, or extra-discursive may come to the surface or be relied upon tacitly when trying to characterize this dilemma more precisely. Certainly, every one of these claims is subject to contention, but taken together, they may be regarded as ramifications of a central question—namely, whether critique can come to know anything of its own limitations. The nonhuman, in this context, does not symbolize but rather indexes the possibility


that such a mode of thought, with its origins in the scientific discourse of Enlightenment reason, may not be able to set to work on what is radically other to it—or the possibility that it can do so, but only by perpetrating an act of epistemic violence. Without aggrandizing a circuit of meta-referentiality, one can ask whether critical thought—as a mobile practice, not a dogma or canon—is able to yield a sense of its own restrictions or to cultivate a sense of what it cannot bring into the space of learning. Can immanent critique take what is inhuman as its object without subsuming it to a Western, anthropic order of signification?

Adorno’s Strength, Bataille’s Abandon

Taking up these concerns was, in a sense, the aim of Adorno’s Negative Dialectics, whose cardinal insistence on the “primacy of the object” marks an attempt to countermand the mastery of nature, which is doubly articulated through the practical domination of the inhuman world and the no less brutal coercion that conceptual thought inflicts on what it seeks to know. I would like for a moment to linger with Adorno’s revision of Hegelian critique because in many respects his conclusions about the relinquishment of the ego—the semblance of which is vital to aesthetic experience—bear an affinity to the expressions of self-forgetting that this dissertation traces. Ultimately, I am interested, in contrast both to Adorno’s negative dialectics and Bataille’s erotics of self-abandon, in thinking about the non-sovereignty of the subject as a condition that does not necessarily have to be inscribed either into what are arguably masculinist values of difficulty or into the climactic structure of a crisis-laden send-off of the I to the event of its dissolution, beyond which there is no return and the screen goes black, as it were.

To begin: Adorno attempts to intervene into the structure of domination by proposing a modification to dialectical thought, so that the latter would, in perpetuity, be submitted to an act of negation that, in resisting closure, is at once final and interminable. The subjective claim to identity would never be granted the last word, so to speak. And any forced resolution between the products of consciousness and what is non-identical to it would necessarily be cancelled, any bid to positivity nullified.  

This strategy of resistance relies on a feat of subjective strength. The subject must be prepared, if not vigilant and ready at any moment, for a last negation of the truth of the whole. So long as history continues, the final negative must be waiting in the wings. Committed though he was to showing how mastery would only revert into the mutilation of the self, cut off from desire and estranged socially, Adorno was ultimately unwilling to forfeit his attachment to the virtue of might. This ideal of a powerful, stalwart mind persists in his work, partly because of his own constitutional disposition, but more importantly, because he associated weakness of will with the conformism that made Nazi Germany possible. One of the most potent kernels of contradiction in his thought, one that is partly inherited from Hegel, is comprised of the tension between his endorsement of the imperative to yield to the object and his institution of the prerequisite of fortitude that becomes necessary to do so.

While it seems to me that Adorno often fails to consider that the resources of negation may not be uniformly available, or that negation, when issuing from different subject-positions, may be met with uneven forms of retaliation, he does tune us into the intimate connection between critique and subjectivity. To return to his remark, quoted above, about how dialectical criticism “teaches us to read,” he provides a clue to the mystery of what holds the practice of critique together. In explicating critique as a training in literacy, he calls forth the figure of the subject of learning without which dialectical progression is unthinkable. Learning provides a framework that permits the subject a wide margin of ruptures in continuity, but without full de-subjection.

Immanent critique depends on the ability to enter into the object, but without getting entirely absorbed into it—that is, without reproducing uncritically the terms of the text. In Hegel’s Phenomenology, the risk of self-loss certainly weighs heavily on consciousness, which cannot proleptically ward off the prospect of irrecoverable disorientation, and quite generally, seems to have a remarkably diminished capacity for foresight. For the Hegelian subject-in-formation, there is no hedging. And though the protagonist proceeds, unable to use reason to dissolve the fundamental opacity of the future, an extra-subjective trajectory of bildung-as-progress holds the experience of the subject together and acts as a safety net that protects from any devastation that cannot be in some way recuperated as lesson.

When Adorno offers a critique of Enlightenment reason that dialectically links capitalist modernity to the archaic order of myth, he identifies a mutation in this sequence of self-departure and return, whereby consciousness is able, through the sobriety of reasoned anticipation, to integrate the future loss into an economy of calculated risk. Odysseus throws himself away to adventure in order to win himself back, value added. And through the introversion of the structure of sacrifice, the subject of reason constitutes himself as a subject of renunciation—that is, one who knows when something of the present is worth auctioning off to future gain. Adorno’s indictment of the cunning of reason perhaps offers more insight into the economic shifts, taking place in his own time, toward abstract, speculative markets than it does into Hegel’s conception of the dialectic. Even so, Adorno helps to identify how the subject of reason—to which immanent critique is bound, at the very least in its origins—emerges through the process of learning to become sovereign over the very prospect of its own dissolution.42

Like Benjamin, Adorno works to unseat the subject of Enlightenment from the one-way track of historical progress, which disregards, if not ruthlessly condemns, anyone who lags behind. In his Three Studies, Adorno makes a reference to Hegel’s “program of self-yielding.”43 With this single, damning phrase, he arraigns the systematization of the act of letting the self go. And though Adorno discomposes the teleological thrust of the dialectical method and also cautions against the surety with which loss is drawn into a recuperative logic that knows no bounds (“Thrift, thrift Horatio, the funeral bak’ed meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables”), he does not ultimately shake the ideological assumption that critical thought requires a resilient subject.44

Certainly, such a subject does not have to be a specimen of seamless cohesion, wholly consistent and purely self-identical through time. But the discontinuities of experience must be able to hang

42 DE, 35-61.
together provisionally in some nexus of learning, even if not inscribed into a strictly developmental trajectory—or else, in a reservoir of subjective determination that does not become objectified into character or personality. What some might identify as the fundamental conservatism of immanent critique—insofar as it remains within the existing order rather than beginning at a point radical to it—is only overcome by one who irrepressibly can confront the illusory world with the clarity of negation. This turning the world-as-it-is against itself may in turn be politicized as a form of dissent. “Only he,” Adorno writes in Negative Dialectics, “who would have used his own strength, which he owes to identity, to cast off the façade of identity—would truly be a subject” (277). Self-relinquishment is the culminating effort that actualizes the subject as non-identical, in a gesture that parallels the final negation that would be required to disclose the totality as false. One should note that, for Adorno (as for Hegel), there are no shortcuts. One cannot simply take a state of differentiation as the starting point. Rather, the rejection of the claim to identity only attains full meaning when the truth of the assimilation of the object into the schemata of subjective intention—not hypothetically, but as a socio-historical process—has been reckoned with and refused.

This disciplined throwing of identity to the winds cannot be integrated into the economy of work or self-building, in the context of which it could be tallied up, accounted for as an experience that yields profit to the subject who emerges from adversity, harder and improved. In order to loose the work of negation from the logic of accumulation, Adorno must repeatedly situate this feat within the temporality of finality—a last act that, like the speech of Beckett’s nearly memoryless characters, is no stranger to repetition. In this respect, his critique of instrumental reason (epistemic) and his gravitation toward lateness (aesthetic) converge, and act as each other’s hinge.

As he envisions it, this final moment of negation does not exhibit the roundness of closure; it has, on the contrary, the quality of being truncated, as if the ending of a sequence had been suddenly lopped off. When, for instance, Adorno theorizes what happens in an encounter with (good) art, he evokes the Kantian analytic of the sublime—proceeding to narrate the experience of self-shattering, but denying the concluding scene of gratified recovery, in which the subject recollects itself, wresting itself from a most terrifying nature by flexing its faculty of reason. The “shudder” [Erschütterung], as he refers to the shock precipitated by the paradigmatic aesthetic object, “provides no particular satisfaction for the I; it bears no similarity to desire. Rather, it is a memento of the liquidation of the I, which, shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude. This experience is contrary to the weakening of the I that the culture industry manipulates.” Again, Adorno takes great pains to distinguish the self-surrender that follows from fortitude and that which merely befalls those who succumb, without a fight, to mass deception: the former yields awareness that self-preservation might be let go, no less as dogma than as a mode of being; the latter is merely the symptom of capitulation—or colloquially, softness. In Adorno’s view, what is at stake is the possible emancipation of the self from its own captivity and of all that the ego has to subdue in order to stand upright: “To catch even the slightest glimpse beyond the prison that it itself is, the I requires not distraction but rather the utmost tension” (AT 245); this arduous experience of being entirely overwhelmed allows art to become transformed into the “historical voice of repressed nature, ultimately critical of the principle of the I” (AT 246).

Is critique possible without a self-sovereign subject who can see it through until the final moment at which it cedes its amassed power—or strains vigorously, like a moth headlong toward the burning

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45 Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (London: Athone Press, 1997), 364, 244.
wick, toward its liquidation? Or, does the prospect of critique close down in direct proportion to the risk of de-subjectivation? If there are repertoires of self-consolidation, are there likewise processes of unlearning, that at the same time, bring about the unbinding of the subject—in a temporality that does not necessarily rise to the order of the punctual simplicity of the event? Could non-sovereignty be taken as a point of departure for thought rather than as the culminating envoi of the subject who has taken stock of the past and knows now what he has to do?

Bataille, Adorno’s contemporary, offers what is perhaps the most comprehensive, even if asystematic, modern discourse of self-expenditure without reserve. And though they both fill their eyes with visions of self-abandon, they are very much, temperamentally and philosophically, each other’s foils. As we saw a moment ago, for Adorno the gravity of the aesthetic shudder offers nothing to desire, no sublime pleasure, no comfort of felt danger in the midst of recollected safety; for Bataille, on the contrary, it is through erotic excess and non-instrumental sacrifice that one makes a break with the economy of dialectical reason. The burst of laughter, which Bataille insists is not a negation, is the only conceivable response that eludes assimilation into the debts and lessons of Hegel’s restricted economy: only when nothing of the self is held back is renunciation not re-absorbed into the economy of life and its conservative logic of sublation.

Bataille joins self-erasure—which he pursued, quite literally and to the extreme, in his unsuccessful attempt to persuade his friends to take his life in an act of human sacrifice—to the enactment of sovereignty, a term that is proximate to the Hegelian concept of lordship [Herrschaft], but does not participate in the latter’s direct antagonism with servility. Bataille envisions an absolute and radical destruction—in his words, “being torn apart, without measure”—that is irrecoverable into a system (of labor). The sovereign is one who does not serve—does not subordinate himself to any other person, any greater cause, not even to himself. Neither does the sovereign bring anything or anyone under its service since mastery has the potential to reverse against itself into a limiting dependence on what is mastered. Bataille’s subject of sovereignty gleams isolate and silent with defiant uselessness, breaking with the order of discursive meaning that would invest death with significance—laughing all the way to the senselessness of ecstasy. A resonance sounding between the antipodes of Adorno and Bataille should now be within the field of audibility. They both draw the experience of letting the self go into the heroics of necessary failure. Or perhaps one might say, recalling a phrase of Wallace Stevens, that they imagine de-subjectivation largely in terms of the “stale grandeur of annihilation.”

This dissertation explores moments of self-forgetting that do not primarily spring from the resources of the subject, gathered together in a potlatch or summoned so that it can go about “rendering the veil it weaves around the object.” Many of the lapses in subject-hood—or, seen in another way, instances of reprieve—to which this study will attend, happen to those whom, in Adorno’s lexicon, might be coded as weak.

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46 Hegel, la mort, 39.
47 Ibid.
48 Even though, in Adorno’s case, the primacy of the object is stressed as a philosophical principle, the latter is largely realized through the activation of a drastic form of self-relation, as is true, too, of Bataille’s sketches of sovereignty. Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, Vintage, 2011), 404.
Although, regrettably, his writing does not appear in a chapter of its own, it should be noted that Robert Walser has served as a muse for this project. His aesthetics of the miniature offers an indomitable vision of an ethos of non-domination that, belonging to the world of underpaid assistants, butlers, creatures who abide by the non-categorical imperative “to be small and to stay small,” young pupils who never make an exit from tutelage and scandalously, have no ambition to do so, makes tangible a counterculture that is in friction with Enlightenment values, though not by virtue of an act of gallant defiance or fantasized overcoming of subjection. His protagonists as well as the rhetoric of hesitation that imbue his *Microscripts* with a touch of formlessness, enact virtuosically an often feminized quality of *Unselbständigkeit*—a quality that Rebecca Comay glosses as “pathological adherence to the nonself.”

As one sees in Walser’s work and in certain discontinuous pages of the modernist archive, letting the self go may not always take the spectacular forms of sovereign accomplishment or reason’s refusal. Self-forgetting can occur within moments of being, ephemeral and sometimes even scarcely communicable, in which the usual traction of self-reflexivity gives. Such is the case here, where Mrs. Ramsay finds herself, as she often does, “sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at….It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one learnt to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers.” Woolf’s domestic scene of labor does not build up to an act of self-recognition, in which Mrs. Ramsay recollects herself out of the materials to which she struggles to give form. In fact, the work at hand seems to recede into a soft focus, as something that takes place in the mode of the meanwhile. This brief inattention to intentional action and to the effort of making—this drift in concentration on the purposive—gives way to a felt indistinction with the inhuman, which is not marked as having any great narrative or social consequence.

The aim, here, is not to advocate for a transvaluation that, as Nietzsche claims of the Christian ethic, sanctifies a hostile position toward life and punishes virility for the sake of elevating weakness in itself. Rather than seeking to stabilize a fixed set of values or codify a set of impossible prescriptions for self-abandon, what this dissertation wishes to show is that de-subjectivation is not always equated with dehumanization and has modalities other than that of the sublime. The potential loss of the cognitive structures that allow the human to gain its bearings through a differentiation from nature need not always inspire panic. Turning to literatures of non-sovereignty, we will see how the inhuman comes into view outside of the subjective nexus of painful limitation.

*Narcissus and the Formation of Species*

The gap between human and inhuman is not a timeless invariant but has been historically sedimented. The literary and visual texts considered in this study are taken up, in part, as if they were fossils that disclose the lineaments of a moment within this trans-historical process. These works, however, are not confined to a reliquary existence as passive script, waiting to be deciphered, but break out of their own petrified state and into the compromised air of the present. That is, their animation offers a partial image of how the residuum of the past abrupts into the space of the

contemporary—irradiated with “what has been”—and bears with it the potential to ramify through the ontological rigidifications that have survived, by grace of the monumental and exacting shelter of cultural transmission.

In what follows, the socio-temporal marker of “modernism” does not make reference to the semi-punctual, sequential schema of aesthetic periodization. The “moment” delineated in these pages is, on the contrary, to be understood in the Hegelian sense—as a scene; a phenomenological landscape of experiential perspectives that may press against each other in their difference; as a provisional shape of what can become conscious and what will remain tenebrous and unknown; a transitory configuration of dialectical tensions, uncertainties, surprises, disquietudes, and hopes, whose very fiber is historical contingency. When such a moment dissolves into another—gives way, for instance, to what has been called postmodernity or post-Fordism—the ensemble of past relations carries forth in ways that may not always be readily apparent but nevertheless are sustained beyond themselves, as memory whose transmission exceeds the individual.

Apart from divesting the temporal structure of the “moment” from the institution of progress as either the ideological motor or teleological horizon of historical change, my adoption of the term diverges in the following respect from its usage in the Phenomenology or in its subsequent revision in The Dialectic of Enlightenment. The work carried out here is not only to show how the emergence and resolution of antagonistic elements constitutes the arrhythmia of historical movement, nor to expose how allegedly advanced stages of civilization can at any moment bottom out, and regress into the mythic barbarism that advancement represses. There is an additional effort, in these pages, to attune cultural analysis to that which does not rise to the threshold of dialectical antagonism—or, put otherwise, is subject to an exclusion that is not properly legible as such, because such precarious elements do not even appear as an eligible target of determinate negation. In a word, the moment is understood to be structured by its own incoherence.

The moment of modernism, I argue, is one in which anthroponarcissism takes shape as a determining principle of social experience and political ecology; and also foments the resources for its own potential dissolution. The term “anthroponarcissism” is not summoned out of any great passion for neologisms. It is, rather, the most apposite name I have been able to find for the problematic that this dissertation seeks to draw into focus and to which these literary and philosophical works of self-forgetting address themselves, albeit with varying degrees of consciousness. “Humanism” and “anthropocentricism” might seem more familiar synonyms for the object of ambivalence that I trace. I have in large part eschewed these better-worn terminologies because the phenomenon in question is not restricted to a Weltanschauung in which secularism and the discursive production of an ennobled race of creatures converge in an optimism that attaches itself to scientific reason, ideals of moral autonomy, and/or a conception of human nature that invests the species with special dignity. The problem, in other words, is not simply that the (“civilized”) human becomes the measure of all things or that is installed as the center of the modern episteme. Part of the predicament, and thus, part of the reason why humanisms have had such staying power despite repeated efforts to decenter “man,” is a reflexivity that is difficult to escape, not least because it exerts itself forcefully at the level of perceptibility.

Put briefly, self-forgetting names diverse forms of de-subjectivation that potentially unbind or threaten the coherence of anthroponarcissist formations. Instances of self-forgetting are those in which the human subject is dissolved, taken aside from the scene of assertion over the object-world,
or dislodged from its place as the cardinal point of reference for value. Unlike modes of aesthetic impersonality or acts of discontent turned reflexively against the subject who carries them out, self-forgetting is neither a gesture of self-sacrifice nor a means of gratifying an impulse to self-destruction.\(^\text{52}\) Rather, letting the self go emerges as an imperfect alternative to capitalist modernity’s joint commitment to productivism and the mastery of the material world.

Narcissism is not invoked here in the loosely pejorative sense—*he’s such a narcissist!*—but in a manner that adheres more closely to its appearance in the Ovidian myth and in its later appropriation by Freud. When asked whether Narcissus will live a life graced by longevity, the seer replies, “If he does not come to know himself.”\(^\text{53}\) The handsome boy, as the story goes, ends up “spellbound by his own self,” or rather by his own image in the pool: the “snowy whiteness of his complexion,” his eyes that look like stars, his exceptionally good hair (*M* lns. 461-462). Something of his predicament begins, however, before the anguished drama of unreachable love gains momentum and leads him to stop eating or sleeping; to apostrophize himself in a moment of lyric eruption (“Where do you go when I try to reach you?”); and, in the course of erotic confusion, to offer a rather moving discourse devoted to the grief of the self-splitting of identity and the calamitous completeness of one who is constituted by taking oneself as an object, i.e. self-consciousness: “What I desire, I have. My very plenty makes me poor” (*M* ln. 511). The trouble begins, in a sense, in the rather early instant, difficult to disarticulate from the moment of sudden captivation, when the pristine environment is regarded solely as a reflective surface for man’s image. He cannot see the body of water as water, or even as pattern, or swaying; he cannot recognize the material surroundings that enable him to behold himself as anything but a deceptive impediment to the satisfaction of his auto-affection.

The situation of Narcissus is one in which the other doubles back into the *I*, one in which there is no *you* that exists outside of the circuit of self-identification. Needless to say, there is a literary dilemma inscribed into this myth. Dialogism relapses into monologue. And the world expresses only what is proper to the self. Insofar as the story narrates the experience of overpowering immobility that is at once utterly overwhelming and entirely incommensurate with the apparent case that would be required to break out of its spell, the myth would have lent itself well to a re-writing by Kafka. It is difficult to say what precisely holds Narcissus there transfixed until death—when something as slight as a turn of the head, a step away from the water’s edge, would have released him from the all-consuming structure of isolation and frustrated love. Ovid does not engage self-reflexivity primarily as a structure of cognition; rather, the specular encounter with the self—by which the subject is produced by taking itself as an object of regard—is held together by the bind of desire.\(^\text{54}\) What, we will ask, might dissolve the peculiar fixation, which, as we learn from a voice that

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\(^{52}\) In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot claims that it is through the extinction of personality that art “approach[es] the condition of science.” The poet, Eliot writes, is a “medium and not a personality.” He goes on to describe the artist’s mind as a vehicle of accumulation and acquisition that awaits activation—“a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.” The “continual” work of “self-sacrifice” that the poet undergoes is carried forth in the service of something “more valuable”—namely tradition, which transcends the individual and is lodged in the prodigious “mind of Europe.” T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (San Diego: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 6.


\(^{54}\) This cautionary tale about self-love is also about how the scene of self-consciousness is mediated by the predominance of the optical. Before sinking into the specular encounter with himself, Narcissus rejects the affection of Echo, the feminized recycler of linguistic material, whose expression of intentionality is always heteronomous to herself, as she can only take up speech in the mode of response to what has already been said by another. In her own reading of Ovid, Spivak considers how Freud, in his theorization of psycho-sexual narcissism, drops Echo’s frame narrative from the
interrupts the narration with a direct address to Narcissus, adheres to what “comes with you, and lasts while you are there; it leaves with you, if you can leave”? The object of this fatal attachment is what attaches to the subject. And to shake this bind is in some sense to bring about the unbinding of what holds to the self, the dissolution of what, for the I is un-leavable.

From Freud’s account, I borrow his provocation to consider narcissism, not as an isolated phenomenon, but as an experience that emerges out of a dynamic tension between ego- and object-love. These two modes of attachment are manifest, in their extreme form, in the paranoid fantasy of apocalypse (the end of the external world would necessarily entail total disinvestment from it) and the person who falls in love (a scenario in which the resources of ego overflow entirely toward the cathected object). It is interesting, to say the least, to consider the extent to which discourses of environmentalism draw from both positions, for instance, in the over-investment in eschatological narratives of eco-apocalypse and in the call to eco-philia that approaches the evacuation of the human subject. At times it seems that one position simply precludes and spells the debt of the other in a rather tight economy of expenditure: “the more of the one is employed, the more of the other becomes depleted.” But, at other moments, this system of accounting does not square so cleanly with Freud’s suggestion that object-attachment is not only an antithetical counterpart, but in fact leans on primary narcissism, which, in a manner of speaking, gives way and can transform into love for the mother or her substitute. Conversely, such outwardly directed attachments can be withdrawn, which is to say that these are not marmoreal, but labile states.

My own portrait of anthropo-narcissism, sketched in following section, shares in Freud’s work insofar as it aims to disclose narcissism as a phenomenon that may express itself as a subjective attitude or predilection, but is, in another sense, trans-individual. Freud, one may recall, retrieves narcissism from its exile to the space of pathology and considers its place in the course of “normal” psychosexual development, which is essential to the formation of the ego. Although the universalizing scope of his findings will not be carried forth, his effort to understand narcissism in its generalized form—that is, not in the restricted sense of an idiosyncratic affliction of a perverse individual, historically identified as “the homosexual”—makes space for an analysis of how even the most isolating experiences are socially mediated.

Keeping in mind these many shades of the Ovidian myth and its afterlives, this project offers as an initial contribution the suggestion that the complex of narcissism might be brought to bear on questions pertaining to the formation and dissolution of the anthropos—the “human,” not as a particular, but in its generic form. Indeed, insofar as species—meaning to “look” or to “behold”—is bound to the many valences of species—which include not only the more familiar denotation of kind and class, but can signify, too, the image of something cast upon a surface, or something reflected there, or something seen but illusory and phantomal—the reconsideration of the human may require an alteration of the phenomenal dynamics of the specular encounter.

scene of analysis. She goes on to argue that the psychoanalytic enterprise, like Narcissus, renders inaudible the voice of she who is other to the self-reflexive subject of knowledge—or, the subaltern. In doing so, she recasts the problem of narcissism as one that is implicated in Eurocentrism. Following this insight through to the other side, my subsequent readings of Benjamin, Freud, and Woolf, in particular, consider how resistance to cultural manifestations of narcissism might, in turn, act as a channel through which discontent with the ethos of imperialism is indirectly expressed. Spivak, “Echo,” New Literary History 24 (1993): 17-43.

A less famous mirror scene of psychoanalysis, found in the periphery of Freud’s recounting of the fort-da game, offers a vision of how moments of self-forgetting might potentially interrupt the optical work of self- and species-consolidation. In the following footnote, Freud observes a form of specular play that differs from the narcissistic encounter with one’s own image and perhaps offers a portal—some small egress to a critical line of thought that is unavailable in Lacan’s mirror stage and occluded by a broader cultural commitment to self-preservation and autonomy:

[A further observation subsequently confirmed this interpretation fully. One day the child’s mother had been away for several hours and on her return was met with the words ‘Baby o-o-o-o!’ which was at first incomprehensible. It soon turned out, however, that during this long period of solitude the child had found a method of making himself disappear. He had discovered his reflection in a full-length mirror which did not quite reach the ground, so that by crouching down he could make his mirror-image ‘gone.’]56

Freud interprets this act as merely another iteration of that well-known game in which a young boy, by casting away a wooden spool and then retrieving it, stages a formative confrontation with the dialectic of presence and absence. This repeated sequence of disappearance and return, Freud conjectures, is enacted as a way to cope with and ultimately master the catastrophic event of maternal departure. While acknowledging the affinity between these two episodes, I am inclined interpret them as distinct imaginative acts, each of which must be taken on its own terms. For while they both involve playing “gone,” one experiments with the truancy of a beloved object (a wooden toy, a mother), while the other is an exercise in absencing the self and its image. Another way to draw out the slight but consequential difference between these two scenes is to observe how, in the fort-da game, the child remains stationary while the spool is made to travel; whereas when the boy crouches below the mirror in order, as it were, to see himself gone, this more athletic act requires him to abandon his upright position, to take leave of his own perspective. The dilemma that this textually marginalized game confronts, is not the unpredictable presence of the loved object. Rather, it prompts us to consider how testing the subject’s constancy is often accompanied by a heightened sense of precarity with respect, not just to a specific object in a given environment, but to one’s capacity to sustain a relation to the world entire. The child seems to answer the Ovidian challenge (“if ever you can go!”) by momentarily leaving behind the unavailing I. Indeed, one of the aims of this dissertation is to account for the (epistemological) risks and pleasures of such practices of self-absention, which suspend or revise the narcissistic bind that forms the human.

Anthroponarcissism and Materialism

This provocation to consider narcissism as a complex that exceeds the individual may recall the triumphalist conclusion at the end of Freud’s 1917 lecture on “Traumatic Fixation.” Following Copernicus, who revealed that the earth is not the cosmological center of the universe, and Darwin, who disabused humanity of its privileged status by revealing its descent from the animal kingdom, psychoanalysis—for whom Freud is the clear metonym— is said to deliver the third and most devastating blow science has ever dealt against the “megalomania” and “naive self-love of men” (SE 284-85). In an anticipation of the resistance he feels sure he will encounter, Freud goes on to describe his own work as inducing a crisis of the household (and, thus, economy), in which the ego is no longer master of the psychic space it imagines to be its own.

My rejoinder to this remark is simply that there is only so much that three men can do. That is, anthroponarcissism—understood as a condition in which the human constitutes a restricted economy of regard that, in the twentieth century, approaches, though always asymptotically, total closure—is a social phenomenon that could not be felled, even by these scientific upheavals.

At times, anthroponarcissism manifests as a discursive principle of organization. To be sure, the emergence of psychoanalysis plays a part in the story of its consolidation, despite the injury Freud claims to inflict on humankind’s propensity to fall enamored with its own inflated powers. When, for instance, Freud looks toward non-European kinship structures, his optic renders the totemic plant or animal, which is cared for and strictly prohibited from being killed, as a substitute for the human father. The nonhuman, it seems, is neither loveable nor grievable in itself. Feelings of aggression and respect for other species become a cipher for ambivalence that is rerouted from the sphere of human sociality. And the Western, scientific conception of the homo sapien holds, invisibly, the contours of the discursive economy of psychoanalysis, which regulates, among other things, whether attachments are classed as meaningful bonds or as mere fetishes. As a hermeneutic practice, psychoanalysis forges an internal logic, according to which the phenomena of experience can be traced back to psychic processes. One detects anthroponarcissism at work in the tempo of interpretation, and in what sometimes appears as intuitive—namely, on what (the eyes, the piece of candy, the bird), in the course of pursuing a sequence of substitutions, one can come to rest. Many have noticed how the psychoanalytic enterprise risks centrifuging the wealth of (narrative) experience into patriarchal and heteronormative configurations of Oedipal conflict and desire. This magnetic pull toward the European nuclear family must also be understood to participate in an ontological segregation, one that, both complicit in and resistant to ideologies of empire, consolidates sociality into the fairly narrow province of “the human,” which, later in the century, with the emergence of human rights, will be taken as the sign of universality. Anthroponarcissism is, in short, is what enables psychoanalysis to be conceived of as system.

That anthroponarcissism does not refer exclusively to a complex within an individual psyche nor to a hypostasized subject—the unitary and universal Human, sunk in absorption into its own image— becomes clearer when placed in the context of broader social transformations. The term, I should add, is not intended to function as a master signifier but as a common ground for considering not only discursive formations, but diverse biopolitical changes and alterations to the (built) environment and sensorium, which took place in the decades before the emergence of
contemporary discourses of environmentalism—that is, before a vocabulary of endangered species or anthropogenic climate change assumed a central place in the popular or scientific imagination.  

Though my readings will focus primarily on theoretical and aesthetic works that are both susceptible and resistant to the threat of narcissistic closure, two historical coordinates are worth mentioning: urbanization and the replacement of animal labor with machines.

First, urbanization. This phenomenon is often understood as a process of dense and relatively rapid population growth, joined with the concentration of material forces of production in geographic areas that cannot be sustained without drawing heavily from the resources of rural or colonial lands. But the formation and over-development of cities, I would like to emphasize, also entails a biopolitical constriction—that is, a restriction of biodiversity, a driving out, extermination, sterilization, or rendering precarious of life-forms that do not contribute to accumulation, do not yield ground rent, or are not under the explicit protection of the state or of legal systems that safeguard property lines. Thus, anthroponarcissism is hardly limited to the sphere of abstraction but presses itself into the concrete aspects of daily urban living: how one moves through space; what one sees when one looks at the built environment; the somatic, and potentially jolting experience of meeting eyes with creatures that one is no longer accustomed to seeing, except in image.

“More and more relentlessly,” Benjamin writes in “Central Park,” “the objective environment of human beings is coming to wear the expression of the commodity” (GS1.2 671; SW2.2 173). With this observation, he strikes upon the way in which the material conditions of capitalist urbanization fan out into an extra-subjective structure of perceptibility, which increasingly restricts the sensorium to what has been produced by human enterprise. Capitalist development, it seems, gives rise to a condition in which all that lies within the field of vision, hearing, and touch confronts the experiential subject as something that is not only priceable and fungible, but generated by (waged) labor—that is, as something sprung from the exertions of human society and cast back reflexively to the (alienated) beholder. The city, as it were, becomes a hall of mirrors.

Interestingly, the dates conventionally ascribed to literary modernism are co-terminus with the emergence of what Timothy Mitchell has named carbon democracy. In the late nineteenth century, Mitchell argues, European social movements—whose struggles resulted in expanded voting rights, labor unions, and insurance programs that offered protection from work-related injuries—emerged in tandem with the assembly of new infrastructures for transporting coal. As ancient stores of plant energy were concentrated into centers of manufacture, human populations were exposed, largely unprepared, to new forms of urban insecurity. This consolidation constituted a productive force, which became, in direct proportion to its power, a source of vulnerability. Amidst such unevenly allocated fossil resources, relatively small gestures could give rise to disruptions on a systemic scale. Just as a cheap and minute piece of material could be used to bring a whole locomotive to a halt, local acts—dallying on the job, disabling a single operator switch, or organizing a general strike in town—could effectively bring to a standstill a vast flow of kinetic energy. See the chapter, “Machines of Democracy,” in Timothy Mitchell, Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil, (London: Verso, 2013).

When understood in biopolitical terms, anthroponarcissism does not, of course, simply entail the total elimination of the inhuman from spaces of urban and suburban development. Domesticated forms of life are selectively tolerated, managed, and even cultivated: pleasure gardens, parks, pets, animal populations that are monitored and administered according to quotas. Additionally, new industries are forged out of this very repression and capitalize on the complementary fetishization of the inhuman body for spectacular consumption—a racialized phenomenon and a wellspring of late capitalist popular culture. Those that are not human are polarized in their existence—as objects of utility or of optical consumption. In The Arcades, Benjamin, who has an exquisite eye for those archival minuetae that are irradiated with what is most decisive in a historical moment, cites the following remark, which brings into view a rather literal facet of the structure of reflexivity generated by anthroponarcissism—one that arises with the new availability of glass as a building material:

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The second historical aspect of anthroponarcissism I will mention extends more widely than the limits of the metropole to include large-scale shifts in resource extraction and industrial production. In Europe, the carbon-based energy system that emerged from the experiments of the eighteenth century freed itself from the limitations of what could be accomplished by animal muscle—harnessed and working in concert. In the industrializing world of the nineteenth century, the laboring bodies of non-human animals were fated to obsolescence earlier than the period typically emphasized by Marxist analyses of the automation of industry. At street-level, the replacement of the horse by the steam-carriage, and later by the automobile (literally, that which is self-moving) was a relatively late, but widely perceptible manifestation of longer, and in the realm of manufacture, well established process of substituting carbon-dependent machinery for animal labor in mining and transport.\(^{59}\)

Though there is hardly a case for technological determinism being made here, subterranean echoes reverberate through the groundwork concurrently laid by idealist philosophy, which systematized, in the realm of intellectual production, the connection between human advancement and the supersession of the finite powers of animal existence. In the idealist tradition, the encounter with animality—and one will recall that the nonhuman is often trafficked, already parceled as an abstraction—still appears under the guise of a struggle. In the preface to the *Phenomenology*, for instance, the merely animal [das Tierische] is referred to, rather starkly, as “anti-human” [Widermenschliche].\(^{60}\) This negation is not statically given, but, as we witness over the course of the turbulent narrative, is produced by the strenuous work of the shadow-boxing spirit. At times, as in the Kantian analytic of the sublime, such thinkers flirt with, though are never quite able to consummate, the fantasy of shedding altogether any dependence on the nonhuman realm, which is heteronomous to rationality.

What could be grouped under the thematic of animal conquest and included within the subjective repertoires for securing supremacy over nature—both external and within—is not, however, the primary focus here. Certainly, discourses of natural domination persist well into modernism and in certain cases, as with Futurism, become amplified by aesthetic currents that nourish ambitions of genocidal subjugation. Following his contention that the Kantian virtue of ethical dignity is an act of

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59 Debates about phasing out animal transport were often framed in terms of a two-party competition: steam vs. horseflesh. In an insult quite typical for the times, the inventor Goldsworthy Gurney testifies before the British Commons that the horse is “a most unproductive laborer, and a dead expense to the country”—a form of rhetoric that carries forth in the discursive production of human populations as disposable.\(^{59}\) Popular arguments advocating for mechanical power underscored cost-efficiency and raised the fantasy of a deathless source of labor-power, which would unburden men from the dependence of animal bodies: “The mechanical horse, unlike his living rival, only eats when he is at work. He does not want his meals served with regularity when he is at home in his stable. His food costs a great deal less. He is never sick or sorry, never tired. He will go on all day, and if need be all night. He does not require a stable. He does not grow ill or die. He will not run away. He does not deposit ordure on the roads.” “Mechanical Road Carriages,” *British Medical Journal* (December 7, 1895), 1434.

aggression directed at inhuman nature, Adorno presses further to say, “Animals play for the idealist system virtually the same role as the Jews for fascism.”

These fatal continuities are lines to which this inquiry holds fast, even as it seeks to bring into view transformations that have until recently remained largely opaque, even to historical materialism, which would arguably be best poised to bring them into the space of understanding. If Marxism remains blind to certain dimensions of anthroponarcissism, this is not because the theoretical optics developed by historical materialism are wholly aloof to it, but rather are shaped by it. To see how this influence exerts itself, one might consider, first and foremost, how “labor,” even while unmarked, refers to human labor. Citing the weaving of silkworms, Marx differentiates the industry of creatures from that of men, arguing that when a nonhuman sets to work, its sheer exertion is a manifestation of its being as a species. Indeed, one of Adorno’s most incisive criticisms of Marx was that he begrudged animals the surplus-value that they generate. The same might be said about slaves, whom Marx draws into proximity with various nonhumans, on account of their shared status as the definitional limit of free labor that is exploited by capitalism. “The slave did not sell his labour-power to the slave-owner, any more than the ox sells his labour to the farmer”: on this basis, a temporal distinction emerges between the human worker and the animal-and-slave, who are also intermixed in Hannah Arendt’s exegesis on the unfreedom of animal laborans. The slave/animal does not sell himself, but is—lives in identity as—a commodity who is sold “once and for all”; whereas the latter auctions his or her own labor-time piecemeal, in an “alternating rhythm..., which throws the worker back onto the market again and again.”

One might also look to how historical materialism has remained steadfast in its attention to the automation of industry, insofar as the latter transforms the worker, in Marx’s words, into a mere “conscious linkage” within an inhuman system of machine processes. In a reversal reminiscent of commodity fetishism’s perversion of person and thing, the laborer whose activity is subsumed to automated production is unable to make instrumental use of equipment and becomes instead a living accessory to technology—an appendage, as it were, to dead and fixed capital. The cultivation of embodied, human skills wanes as the machine steps forth as self-animating, virtuosic, and endowed “with a soul of its own.” “It consumes coal,” Marx writes, supplying an analogy that enacts the very inversion he describes, “just as the worker consumes food.” Versions of this argument, as we will see in the third chapter, recur throughout Marxist thought. In contracted form, this analytic makes visible a series of inversions, which flip but do not ultimately break open or reconfigure the circuit that is constituted by human labor and the objects that it produces. Animacy, the argument goes, is siphoned off from human labor-power and invested into the world of things, which, because the original source of their life-principle is forgotten, appear to be preternaturally ensouled—hungry, temperamental, gifted. The distortion engendered by capitalism is one in which the human actor is only able to be acted upon.

65 Ibid., 693.
This element of Marx’s critical repertoire, which compels both the recognition and practical reversal of an inversion through which people are rendered passive to the things that they bring into being, bears the mark of his early insistence on rectifying Feuerbach’s tendency to conceive of “the thing, reality, sensuousness” (a striking sequence of appositions), solely as an “object” of contemplation. At times, I will suggest, Marx’s effort to correct the “old” materialism’s commitment to a theoretical stance toward reality verges on overcompensation. Going much further than a recognition of the previously unacknowledged place of human, practical activity, he elevates it to the extent that it becomes the privileged, and at times exclusive, line of sight for economic analysis and of the political more broadly.

There are two resultant losses whose contours this dissertation will trace. As materialism is re-conceived in order to give primacy to the self-determination of human society, modes of being that are not predominantly oriented toward self- or world-transformation are regarded either as symptomatic of exploitation or merely the excrescence of a contemplative epistemology: they are marked only insofar as they are to be overcome. The human capacity for receptivity, meanwhile, falls into shadow. Banished inadvertently along with the purely theoretical attitude he associated with Epicurean philosophy and Feuerbach’s Christianity, receptivity—as an embodied, and at times aesthetic aspect of experience with political implications that, as I will argue, we have yet to grasp—becomes somewhat unthinkable to certain orthodox strands of materialism, for whom expressions of passivity are liable to be equated with forced subjection to capitalist regimes of work or located with a spectrum of inertia that ranges from practiced disengagement to a less deliberate endorsement of the world as it is. As Chapter Two argues, Benjamin’s work offers a way to redress Marx’s overcorrection, by shifting attention from the scene of commodity production and the perils of alienation that attend it, to the sometimes expropriative experiences of indistinction with the object-world, many of which cluster around the phenomenon he names “empathy with the commodity.”

Against the conception of man as an abstract individual, Marx redefines the human as fundamentally social—but with the unstated proviso that sociality is human. This tacit understanding is operative not only in the early work—in which human agency and its derailment feature prominently as the motor of economic transformations—but persists well into what Althusser identifies as Marx’s anti-humanist phase. In a continuation of the inheritance of idealism, which produces meaning by differentiating spirit from mere matter, Marx conceptualizes human activity as standing apart from nature, which is split into a triplicate existence as the given (raw material); as “material substratum” that mediates the potential freedom of human labor and, when labor is subtracted, is conceived as a “residue”; and as a limiting condition of the metabolic processes of production and subsistence. The delimitation of history as what is authored by human action—“of course,” he writes in The German Ideology, “we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself, geological, orhydrographical, climatic and so on”—points to the second loss: namely, the disappearance of the nonhuman from the field of sociality. ⁶⁶

What should be clear by now is that anthroponarcissism—whether expressed in theory or in material circumstances that are, from the standpoint of daily experience, more tangible—remains insoluble when regarded strictly as a problem of biopower or economy. We are not solely concerned, in other words, with the question of the political decision to let populations die or make them live, or in the qualified elimination of the inhuman by capitalist regimes of production that

determine what and who is coded as a surplus labor, and thus is rendered disposable. *Aisthesis*, in all senses of the word, lies at the heart of this predicament insofar as anthroponarcissism names the regimes and routines of perceptibility that govern what can be sensed and what can be ethically discerned. One of the most fatal partitions of the sensible is not comprised of a soundless, imageless barrier that quarantines the inhuman from the space of civility in an act of brute repression but rather of a pervasive ecosystem of mirrors, papered over the surface of things, which returns to the human subject everything it encounters, captivatingly, as if it originated from the place of identity.67

Receptivity

Delimiting in relation to the problematic sketched above, the period that this dissertation draws into focus spans the middle-time after the onset of industrialization but before “nature is gone for good” (as Jameson glosses the postmodern condition).68 I am interested, in other words, in what becomes possible just before the other foot drops; before the often vaguely defined sense of ecological fatalism sets in; before the process of enclosure is recognized to be complete and, taking the long view of the civilizational project, just before the cultural paradigm fixated on the sovereignty of nature over man, who must fight back with the cunning of reason, meets its full dialectical reversal in the perception that collectively, humankind has the technical capacity not only to free itself from the rule of natural law, but to engineer it.

Within this moment of late modernity, anthroponarcissism approaches total social mediation. This is not to say that it presides over modern life and death in any uniform and monolithic way, but that it increasingly conditions experience and the coordinates of perceptibility across diverse demographic and geographic strata, and finds expression in disparate fields of cultural activity—in both high and mass forms, in private life as well as in collective gatherings, in specialized avenues of research and in broader structures of feeling.

In addition to offering insight into the problematics of modernity made familiar by Simmel, among other social theorists—the way, for instance, in which personal memory and perception come into conflict with the standardization of time or how new forms of stranger sociality and anonymity emerge in newly constituted urban centers—modernist writing, I argue, offers diverse responses to anthroponarcissism that range from captivation to curiosity to dissent to confusion to the vaguely defined feeling that something’s not right.

The following chapters distill from this archive what might be thought of as a dialectical counter-force to anthroponarcissism. I examine how writers turn to receptivity as a potentially radical resource for subjective expropriation—one that might be able to dislodge, if not break the gaze away from, the narcissistic bind, and potentially give way to the inhuman that such a bind forecloses. Indeed, many of the thinkers find that the refusal of anthroponarcissism is conditioned by an activation of receptivity and a re-conception of the subject as nonsovereign. The capacity for receptivity, moreover, contains the promise of undermining any full claim to the proper—or what

belongs to the self, what is encompassed by self-possession. This brings us back, full circle, to the question of de-subjectionation, since not disabling or disavowing one’s susceptibility is, at this historical juncture, to risk the unbinding or destruction of the subject of experience. What may sometimes appear as a peculiar disregard for the preservation of one’s life—or more bluntly, what may be disparaged as a weakness of will or a proclivity toward suicidal ideations—can in fact be a mode of refusing the ideal of (psychic) resilience itself, and along with it, the priority of the anthropos over the inhuman.

“The eye of the city dweller,” Benjamin writes, “is overburdened with securing functions [Sicherungsfunktionen].”69 Following the itinerant trajectory charted by certain motifs of Baudelaire, Benjamin gives an account of how exposure to shock has become the norm of modern experience. For consciousness that is unremittingly besieged by innumerable threats to its livelihood—not only on the battlefield or in the sudden and jarring accident, but in one’s habitual environment, in the daily jolt of the crowd, for instance, or in the little brutalities of public transport—the price of resilience is no less than desensitization. Observing how Baudelaire “describes eyes that have lost the ability to look,” Benjamin sketches a graphic portrait of the defensive subjectivity begotten by capitalist urbanization. Such a psyche is one that at any moment might suffer a disturbance or overstimulation and thus has been trained to practice utmost vigilance over its surroundings—to keep a third eye out for the police, to steel itself preemptively against novel forms of urban violence, to be perpetually ready to parry whatever stimulus may befall it. Survival depends on the fortification and partial deadening of the sensorium. For such creatures of the metropole, the connection between memory and perception is short-circuited. In lieu of reflection, there are only disaggregated splinters of information that cannot be drawn through narrative structures of durational experience. The individual is inured to any experiential modality other than an engagement with what takes place in the field of immediacy and utmost nearness and, perpetually on guard, is no longer capable of “surrender to distance and to faraway things” (341). The vitreous eye, in sum, is Benjamin’s metonym for the modern crisis in “perception itself” (SW4 338).

This dissertation inquires into how, in the context of this problem of anesthesia, re-sensitization might be possible, and how, moreover, the recovery of the ability to be affectable might even be regarded of as a mode of resistance against the cultural imperative to adapt to modernization by honing and mastering technics of self-defense. The question raised, in other words, is whether the constitutive experience of being vulnerable to the threat of psychic and somatic injury can be met with something other than an act of securing more tightly the borders of the space of identity. Might there by something that proves intransigent to the work of defensive closure that modernity mandates for survival?

Re-theorizing and developing new practical repertoires of receptivity, I argue, proves vital to the endeavor to break through the blunting of the collective sensorium. Rather than falling into step with the now classical definition of modernity as the age of shock, one might instead consider this cultural moment as one in which receptivity must be self-managed and regulated to an unprecedented degree. At the same time, new cultural anxieties emerge, related to the notion that one’s sensitivity can bring about one’s death. And while one could certainly emphasize the mixed achievement of perceptual fortification, lingering, alternatively, with various practices of receptivity opens up a language for fringe experiences and modes of engaging with the world that, within a

69 “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” SW4, 341; GSW, 651.
cultural framework that so effectively joins defensive subjectivity with self-preservation, are largely only legible as eccentric or pathological.

If receptivity constitutes a modality of dissent, it is one that confounds the conventional coordinates of political resistance, which often afford a central place to the exercise of human, practical will and willfulness in the direction of defiance. Receptivity, as we shall see, runs transversally to the axis of activity and passivity and ranges widely on the spectrum of intentionality—sometimes indicating a state that is not at all voluntary, or at other times, channeled more deliberately as a faculty that can be to a certain extent trained. The argument unfolded in the following chapters makes recourse to two rudimentary and distinct discourses of receptivity, whose central elements are explicated briefly below. In both, receptivity proves central to the constitution and potential undoing of the human, which is a prospect met with some anxiety.

The first begins but does not end with Kant and situates receptivity in a predominately epistemological and aesthetic framework. Receptivity, or as he puts it, the “capacity to be affected,” is a source of non-conceptual knowledge that introduces certain paradoxes of the will. Kant’s description of receptivity as a (decidedly human) capacity [Fähigkeit]—almost even, as a power—might lead us to treat it as if it were a gift, an ability that one can exercise at will. On the contrary, receptivity for Kant is “constant,” a more or less unalterable, unchangeable form that is “always” at work in human intuition (181). For better or worse, receptivity is inalienable. One cannot, as it were, turn it off or lose it, without ceasing to be human. The form of our sensibility is inseparable from our existence as humans; it keeps the subject tethered to the anthropocentric vantage and distinguishes humans—or sometimes less neutrally, elevates them—above other sentient life. But at the same time, receptivity lies at the threshold of the human and marks the untresspassable gateway to the inhuman realm of the noumenal. It should be noted, moreover, that the significance of receptivity, in this context, cannot be grasped outside of its opposition to spontaneity. 70 Though Kant is insistent that neither should “be preferred to the other” (A 51), there has been an asymmetrical valuation of the latter faculty, which has been privileged as the locus of both artistic creativity (bringing forth representations) and morality (the ability to initiate a new causal chain). This bias has manifested, not only in the romantic poetic traditions, but also in political theory. Rosa Luxemburg, for instance, celebrates spontaneity as the collective wellspring of the mass strike. And generations later, Fanon will reprise this longstanding preference, in his appraisal of spontaneity in the context of colonial insurrection.

The second discursive touchstone is psychoanalytic. In the Freudian conception, receptivity is understood as the psychical system’s innate and “unlimited” capacity for new perceptions. The

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70 Despite its importance, receptivity will be, in Kant’s system, somewhat subordinate to the more technical opposition between sensibility and understanding [Verstand]—the former, designating the manner in which objects are given to us, and the latter, the faculty by which we cognize objects through concepts. Kant presents us, then, with two interdependent faculties, which together constitute the whole of our cognition [Erkenntnis]. There is, in other words, a small cleft between receptivity and sensibility, an implicit hierarchy, as receptivity—which, as Kant maintains, differs from spontaneity in that it is non-conceptual—is put to work in service of a conceptual definition. At the sidelines of the more pronounced contrast between receptivity and spontaneity, we have, in sum, a less dramatic, yet constitutive distinction between receptivity and sensibility, which are and are not substitutable. Receptivity is doubly removed from the conceptual order, since semantically it signifies only our capacity to be impressed upon instead of being the faculty for conceptual determination (spontaneity), and because within Kant’s linguistic economy, it is employed as the non-conceptual ground of the conceptual category of sensibility. Put more simply, that receptivity is not often included in glossaries is telling.
limitlessness of this capacity is not merely a condition of experience, but will become a problem for the subject to whom this capacity belongs. Receptivity, in his account, proves crucial to questions pertaining to the ability for an organism/ego to withstand destructiveness originating from a hostile environment. One of the problems he is trying to resolve, in both the second section of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and in the “Note on the Mystic Writing Pad,” is one of limited resources: he is trying to determine, more specifically, how and where memory-traces are stored, and how we can record memories without quickly “exhausting” the capacities of the perceptual system (MIF 212). In other words, Freud reformulates the originary capacity to be affected as an economic problem—one of psychic expense. What we find in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is not the more common argument in the Western tradition, that in order to realize properly one’s humanity—as a rational being—one has to repudiate, master, or transcend what is inhuman in us. His point is, rather, that to be human, to maintain life, requires a deadening. The survival of the human, in other words, requires the human to become to a degree inhuman—an idea that seems to be rhetorically enacted in his repeated and nearly Kafkaan figurations of sensory organs as a form of creaturely life that takes in homeopathic doses of exteriority: “feels which are all the time making tentative advances towards the external world and then draw back from it” (31). Primary susceptibility is not just constitutive of what it is to be human, but, in being at odds with the maintenance of psychic and material barriers, also continually places the boundary of the human into question. Receptivity, in short, may very well lead to de-subjectivation.

Just a year before *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is published—and before she began to study Freud more seriously, Woolf, in this famous passage from “Modern Fiction,” touches upon this dilemma when she portrays the mind of the novelist, less as a fabricator than as a receptive medium whose act of reception is, as we just witnessed in Freud, indistinguishable from inscription:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms…. Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.

She conceives of the act of writing not quite as an expressive gesture, an externalization of inner resources, but as a form of permission or openness to allowing consciousness to be marked—“scored,” even. It is not the task of the author to bring order to the contingencies of experience, or to bring the particulars of life under a structure of the mind, but to enable oneself to be impinged

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71 The economic dimension is perhaps even more prominent in Nietzsche, for whom defense is not only performed in interpersonal relations but can also be required by certain urban environments. He writes, in *Ecce Homo*, “Caution against expenditure of defence: The reason for this is that expenditures in the service of defence, however small they might be, will lead to an extraordinary and totally superfluous impoverishment as soon as they turn into a rule or habit. Our large expenditures are the small ones that take place most frequently. Warding things off, not letting them come to you, these are expenditures—make no mistake about it, energy wasted on negative goals. In the constant need to ward things off, you can become so weak that you are unable to protect yourself any more…. Or suppose I found myself in a large German city, one of those large built-up vices where nothing grows, where everything both good and bad needs to be trucked in. Wouldn’t this turn me into a hedgehog?” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 95.

upon and to “trace”—to follow lightly, rather than to inscribe deeper or otherwise—the result of an impingement that may sometimes strike the mind with the sharpness of an affliction. The evocation of an atomistic shower may suggest her adherence to a materialism rooted in scientism. It is less interesting to suggest that this metaphor is evidence of an old need of the aesthetic to conceive of itself by borrowing from the authority of hard science than to notice how closely, in a Western tradition, scientific objectivity and a practice of receptivity may seem to resemble each another. For they both require the abeyance of the subject for the production of knowledge.

Although in both the Kantian and Freudian visions sketched above, receptivity seems to be subjectively anchored, self-forgetting cannot be fully inscribed within the parameters of human cognition, (aesthetic) perception, or even those of the unconscious. The movement of de-subjectivation does not end with the subject, nor does it necessarily deliver the inhuman that awaits.
WHEN THINGS SUDDENLY SPEAK

The following two chapters are given over to moments of surprise when things suddenly speak.

When a thing gets to speaking, something is out of line. And in such moments, the power of speech, ordinarily proper to human subjects, arrives from some unexpected elsewhere—somewhere that is extrinsic to subjectivity. A message arrives, in other words, from outside the economy of mutual recognition—from what has failed, refused, or simply been forgotten to be acknowledged as human. And this arrival sends a tremor, disrupts the domain of speakability, which is constituted not only by content—what can be said or what will be censored—but also by the prior determination of who is eligible to speak and who is legible as a speaking being. Indeed, it seems that very often the grammatical division between who and what marks the lethal line that not only segregates persons from things but also selectively elevates message over mere noise. So, when things suddenly speak, such speech manifests the potential to unmoor the coordinates of address that anchor an order of intelligibility in which the ontological supremacy of the human over the nonhuman is propped up by the corresponding division between those with language and those bereft of it.

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Walter Benjamin, known in many quarters primarily as an archaeologist of mass culture, worked to break open objectivity in such a way that objectification would no longer be synonymous with either a process of reification or violent subjugation. The arc lamp, the sandwich board, the magic lantern, the inner lining of a coat, the sock turned inside out from a “pocket” into a “gift”: his attention to minor objects, which strikes some as the symptom of a grand tinkerer, evinces a commitment to keeping a redemptive eye toward particulars that had already fallen under the shadow of conceptual universality or mass production. This habit of remaining close to maximally disposable commodities and, correspondingly, to literary forms of the small (the anecdote, the denkbeeld, the fragment, the citation) may be read, too, as the harbinger of a method of new inquiry, which realizes as an epistemic practice, the “primacy of the object” that Adorno could only theorize. This work—of offering a critique through which it would become newly possible not only to analyze this or that cultural artifact (its production, its use, its damage) but also to query what it means to be an object in the first place—was not accomplished punctually in a single project. Because it was less a contained task than a bass line that ran, sometimes errantly, from his early theory on language (1916) through to his unfinished Passagenwerk, one must, in order to hear the full range of his thesis, listen in on it as it unfolds at various points in his thinking.

Accordingly, this and the following chapter are offered as companion pieces that compose along view of Benjamin’s inquiry into the extra-subjective. Taken together, these pages cast light on three kindred arenas in which he works through philosophical conceptions of objecthood and thinghood, so as to make way for the possibility of the nonhuman’s emergence, apart from anthropic
determination—even and especially when, as with the commodities manufactured under late capitalism, seemingly subsumed by it in a way that appears to be total: first, in his early attempt to revise the epistemic encounter—that is, the (often prototypical) scene in which a confrontation with an object becomes the occasion for generating knowledge about it; second, in his theory of language, which admits of an inhuman address, and thus, perspective; and third—a thematic reserved for the following chapter—in his push against the theory of reification in order to make space within historical materialism for an acknowledgement of an animacy in the world of things that is irreducible to human labor.

None of these are possible, I argue, without an adjustment to the subjective comportment presumed to be necessary for the emergence of truth. What Adorno, in their epistolary exchange of 1938, discredits as Benjamin’s “ascetic refusal of interpretation” is the latter’s allegiance, not only (as Benjamin defended himself) to a philological method that “proceeds by details and so magically fixes the reader.”¹ The practice of self-abandon to the object—which is consonant with Benjamin’s self-legislated imperative to omit the first person from his writing (except in letters), and in a different way, acts as a limited antidote to the capitalist vision of the author as producer—is also a refusal to follow suit in modern philosophy’s exile of the mimetic faculty, as being irrational or able only to give rise to pseudo-knowledge.

In keeping with this dissertation’s larger aim—that is, of understanding how the limits of human sovereignty are implicated in questions pertaining to the nonhuman—this chapter considers Benjamin’s claims about the emanation of language from the world of things, while taking as a complementary object of study all that is shaded over by Adorno’s nearly accurate but ultimately misleading identification of Benjamin’s philosophy with the subject’s evaporation, which, having been taken to an extreme in the Trauerspiel and The Arcades, becomes indistinguishable from the suspect sorcery of positivism. Noting that Benjamin, “[i]n all his phases, conceived of the downfall of the subject and the salvation of man as inseparable,” Adorno offers the following, profoundly ambivalent verdict: because of its elimination of “the subjective dimension,” Benjamin’s philosophy “is no less a source of terror than a promise of happiness.”²

There remains much more to be said about this animating principle of Benjamin’s writing. To begin: his disinclination from the province of the I, which includes the various sub-regions of psychologism and subjectivism, can neither be properly understood as a determinate negation nor as an eradication of the subject of experience to produce an unpeopled field of scientific objectivity. The movement I trace in Benjamin’s thought is not a positing [setzen] of the not-I, in the sense made familiar by the German Idealist tradition.³ It is not, in other words, an initiative undertaken by consciousness, which results in a difference that, once produced and recognized (as produced), can be taken back in as a lesson or as a constitutive other within a larger moment of identity.

Insofar as Adorno re-inscribes the recession of the I in Benjamin’s writing into the unfulfilling dialectics of self-negation or moralizes it, as he does in their correspondence, as a show of “ascetic discipline,” this element of Benjamin’s thought remains wrongfully circumscribed within the

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problems of the self. What may appear, as it does to Adorno, as an act of withholding—or in his words, as “a questionable procedure of ‘abstention’”—is better understood, I am arguing, as an effort to disarticulate thought from the preservation of the human’s sovereignty over what it cognizes and brings into the space of language. 4

**Self-forgetting**, I would suggest further, lends itself more aptly to bringing this aspect of Benjamin’s thought into name than the putative “anti-subjectivism” that commentators from Adorno to Martin Jay attribute to Benjamin’s method. 5 In doing so, they give the impression of a relatively stable stance taken against the protagonist of the philosophy of consciousness. What, by contrast, I am attempting to draw into view is not a position but a process—a process of missing, of losing one’s hold on the self. Both forget and the German counterpart vergeessen are composed of a prefix that rebuts the stem, meaning “to get,” “to grasp,” “to seize.” Self-forgetting, then, carries its own internal resistance to becoming prescriptive, since it involves a loosening of the grip of possession—a falling away of an I, which would have at its avail the techincs of continuity that could see through an intended course of action. If posed as an injunction, self-forgetting would undo the structure of command by making its execution impracticable. Self-forgetting, in short, names an experience that cannot be locked into a field of intentionality. At the same time, this Benjamian drift into the non-intentional must be distinguished from a total immersion into the flux of immediacy and the affirmation of irrationalism that might result.

Once set into motion, the process of self-forgetting is not necessarily accomplished in its finality; nor does it always take the form of an ultimate break or abandonment of reason. For it is left indeterminate whether the self forgotten will be recollected, and if recollected, in what way changed.

**I. Epistemic Dispossession**

Benjamin sensed that it was not just the object of philosophy, but objectivity itself that needed to be transformed. Echoing an earlier distinction he makes between what is communicated in rather than through language, he contends in a 1923 fragment, “On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy,” that there is no truth about an object, only in it. So much rests on his longtime preference for this latter preposition, which allows him, through the most minute of words, to decline the subjective distance that makes instrumental appropriation possible. In manifests a commitment to setting loose what inheres in the object of study rather than imposing a second-order knowledge, produced by a knowing subject who maintains its authority from without—by being at a remove, by being untouched. An epistemic paradigm of disinterestedness cannot be sustained in light of Benjamin’s conviction that one can never stand outside of history. The past cannot be surveyed as if it were constituted by parcels of successive, homogenous time; for the Jetztzeit—the time of the here-and-now—is always implicated in the temporal constellation through which the past flashes into view. The ample work devoted to Benjamin’s philosophy of history helps to illuminate his refusal, made explicit in this fragment, of the “bourgeois” affiliation of timelessness with objectivity. But less often remarked upon—and this is the thread traced here—is

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5 In the final chapter of *Melancholy Dialectics*, Max Pensky links the “elimination” and “absence” of the subject in Benjamin’s method both to the elimination of theory and the overcoming of the melancholic position that is epitomized by the figure of the Gräbher. Like Adorno, Pensky’s account does not consider fully the processual dimensions of desubjectivation.
how Benjamin sought a mode of theoretical inquiry that would be possible for a non-sovereign subject to perform. In the above mentioned fragment, he re-imagines the observer as someone who, hardly remaining aloof to her material, would allow herself to be radically affected by it. A corresponding shift can be traced in his re-conception of the object (and in this way, Benjamin is perhaps more Hegelian than Adorno), as something that is not inert or unmoving, but animate and capable of surprise.

In place of a method grounded on critical detachment, Benjamin proposes a practice of non-appropriate looking on. As much feminist thought has shown, optical confrontations have been associated with a sometimes coercive process of securing epistemological certainty, through which what is seen is established as an object (of desire) and becomes, in being gazed at, objectified. Benjamin does not abandon the spectatorial encounter as a privileged scene in which truth is constituted. He remains within the visual field but re-conceptualizes the relational dynamics that emerge whenever a sightline is forged. He envisions a kind of gaze that does not grasp but becomes the means by which the beholder admits to being overtaken:

Our gaze must strike the object in such a way that it awakens something within it that springs up to meet the intention. Whereas the reporter who adopts the stance of the banal philosopher and specialized scientist indulges himself in lengthy descriptions of the object at which his gaze is directed, the intensive observer finds that something leaps out at him from the object, enters into him, takes possession of him, and something different—namely, the nonintentional truth—speaks from out of the philosopher. (SW/1 405)

Benjamin forsakes neither knowledge nor the prospect of objectivity. What he does repudiate is a framework in which a marmoreal subject standing at a remove from a petrified object is taken as the precondition of objective truth.

The “nonintentional truth” that lies dormant in the object should not be mistaken for the contents of the perceiver’s unconscious. Such a truth is—and Benjamin would likely insist that this claim should not be dismissed as metaphorical—something that issues from the object itself, and speaks through the observer whose intention, or exertion, is not so much realized as met. Gazing is imbued with a non-domineering quality: it is not a way to hold fast to the object, to record it, to make it still so it can be known. Nor is observation, and its literary accomplice, description, a technique for accumulating perceptions. Looking, for Benjamin, hardly constitutes the object; rather, it activates, incites what is already there. Observing becomes a way to give way—in a reversal by means of which it is not the subject who speaks about the object, but the object that, as it were, speaks the subject.

The scene of knowledge acquisition is thus rewritten as an episode of possession in which the subject’s own intentional aim is derailed, taken over, charged with an alien current. Under possession, the knowing subject’s detachment is disrupted, as he finds himself thoroughly breached by the object seen. He does not speak what he means to say, but, as it were, brings to speech what he does not mean. But what takes place in Benjamin’s scene of epistemic dispossession is perhaps less a reversal of terms than their unexpected destabilization. It is not a method in the scientific sense of the word—and perhaps is not even repeatable. Much as in literary

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fiction, an experience can remain unactualized but be given a potent presentation that in turn can mediate social experience—can alter, for instance, what it is to lie sick in bed or to leave a nation behind—Benjamin narrates the possibility, so rarely envisaged, that an epistemic subject might appear vulnerable to what is heteronomous to it, and consequently, be moved into the expression of “nonintentional” truth. It is not that subject and object are presumed to be a primordial state of undifferentiation or that, after their separation, they are reconciled into an organic whole. Nor are we drawn into a wholly monist world in which material is understood to partake in a self-organizing vitalism. The separation of subject and object, which is not a metaphysical constant but the precipitate of historical processes, is the starting point of this scene; and it is the work of this scene to enter into this modern epistemic paradigm and to shake it from within—precisely by envisioning the subject as shaken.

Over the course of these reflections on Benjamin, we will see variations of this image-scenario, as it returns, time and again, in later stages of his thinking—in subsequent years reworked to take on synesthetic dimensions and recast in the disparate genres of philosophical writing, aesthetic criticism, childhood memoir, and historical materialist montage. The fragment that we have just read imagines subjective dispossession as it takes place within the confines of the epistemological framework—that is, within the relatively sterile, dyadic framework of subject-object, which Benjamin had already identified as no more than an “mythology” in an essay written five years earlier (GS 2161; SW 7 103). In this piece, titled “on the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” he contends that the division between subject and object that grounds the Kantian paradigm is indicative, not of truth, but of the “hollowness of experience,” which had been separated fatefully from the realm of knowledge. The epistemological notion of “cognizing man,” Benjamin claims further, is nothing more than one type of “insane consciousness” on a spectrum with other modes of empirical experience from which Enlightenment reason would like to distance itself: pre-animists who name themselves after sacred animals and plants; clairvoyants who feel the sensations of others as their own; the mad, who do not stand against, but rather identify themselves with the objects of their perception. “On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy” might be seen, then, as an attempt to re-introduce, immanently, an experiential dimension of self-forgetting into a scientific discourse that had resolutely forbidden it in order to secure its claim on certainty.

Ultimately, the Kantian framework of cognition—along with its diminished terminology of subject-object—proves inadequate for the philosophy of experience that Benjamin works to develop into a vantage from which the phantasmal reality of capitalism can be comprehended. Although the epistemological scenario of dispossession falls away from his later writings, self-forgetting remains an essential motif—or perhaps, an embodied touchstone—that reappears in wide array of scenes that are central to Benjamin’s thought on the nonhuman: the child in a fit of mimesis with an object of play; the surprising coming-into-language of things ordinarily considered mute; the preternatural glow of the auratic object; the disarming encounter with the commodities in the arcades.

If there is a political dimension to the resoluteness with which Benjamin makes self-forgetting indispensable to critical thought, it does not take the form of a program. To ask, in other words, what such a philosophy of experience delivers to praxis is less promising than the question of what it might conceivably interrupt. Anticipating briefly the work of the next chapter, I will mention that one facet of the materialist context into which his epistemic scenario might be said to intervene—albeit indirectly—is distilled in Marx’s indictment, which Benjamin quotes some years later in the convolute of the _Arcades_ devoted to the collector: “Private property has made us so stupid and inert that an object is only ours if we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when we directly possess,
eat, drink, wear, inhabit it (EM 277; AP [H3a, 7]). The impoverishment of relationality into the limited functions of ownership and use does not only determine human-object relations under late capital, but penetrates the very structure of subjectivity. In order to subsist, the wage laborer must relate to his own labor-power as a commodity, as something of which he, and he alone, has the right to dispose. Epistemic dispossession does not offer any straightforward resistance to the internalization of the capitalist structure of exploitation, which makes one’s emergence as a ‘free’ subject inextricable from converting one’s own capacity into a property that one has the exclusive power to alienate. Though his engagement with Marxism would not deepen until the 1930s, this early fragment contains—like a forgotten seed—the potential for envisioning a disruption of the primacy of object-possession, not only in the sphere of knowledge production but also in that of concrete social reality. Self-forgetting would not only cut loose the legal and economic claim forged between owners and their means of production, but also would unfasten the bind between the self and the part of the self that is taken possession of in order for the subject to draw itself into being. A dispossession, under these terms, would entail a de-subjectivation. This would not necessarily spell the end of subjectivity in any eschatological sense but rather a breaking asunder of a contingent form of subjectivity that involves a self-objectification in preparation for taking the self as an object of property. In short, Benjamin envisions a form of subjectivation in which the I does not necessarily emerge in tandem with the entitlement to say mine.

II. Benjamin’s Twin Brother

One of Benjamin’s great gifts is his melancholic willingness to take leave of the steady stone of historical outcome and lead us back through development’s debris, in a flight whose wind blows open, sometimes only by an imperceptibly small margin, all the doors that have been sealed off by the victors. Behind one of these accursed portals is the chatter of objects, rising to a voice whose range of profundity and senselessness does not fall, as it does now, under the imperious standard of human communication. Sometimes, when he looked at a thing, he saw it as if it had not yet been carted off to the zone of degradation—the object-world—where piled, shoulder to shoulder, they could be looked upon as mute litter, scattered throughout the hinterlands that stretch beyond the economy of recognition. So often Benjamin’s gaze turns itself toward what, when entering a room, is not only not acknowledged, but presumed not to be in need of acknowledgement. The telephone, he writes in Berlin Childhood, “was my twin brother [Zwillingsbruder]” (GS7 391; SW4 349). And with a queer pathos, he goes on to narrate, ceding the lines of his own autobiography, “the humiliation of its earlier years”: “At that time, the telephone still hung—an outcast settled carelessly between the dirty-lien hamper and the gasometer—in a corner of the back hallway, where its ringing served to multiply the terrors of the Berlin household” (GS7 391; SW4 350). Calling the apparatus into the pages of the familial melodrama, claiming it there as bretheren, he smuggles the phone, as if under the breast of a coat, into the Oedipal hovel—the antechamber to Kant’s kingdom of ends.

What is sometimes referred to as the “method” of Benjamin’s thought is fringed with the hope that salvaging the remnants of destroyed objects—a form of historical work distinct from reconstruction and more akin to the increasingly criminalized art of trash collecting—could not only draw together disparate objects in such a way that something new of past would flash into view, but might also re-constellate the very field of objectivity. Adorno criticizes such a leap from the particular to the general as insufficiently dialectical. But in a way, a fidelity to a practice of thought, which decidedly

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7 In the Complete Correspondence, see the letter from Adorno to Benjamin, dated 10 November 1938.
does not turn away from mediation but rather draws mediation into the space of thinking, is expressed in Benjamin’s attempt to reimagine objectivity, not in isolation, but through redrawing the territorial lines of the kingdom of ends—i.e., the place proper to humanity, or, by analogy, the seat reserved for the auteur in the field of cultural production. Sensing that the boundaries could not, without claiming authority that was not only not available but also implicated in the violence of History (a problem later named differently as the subaltern’s silence), Benjamin worked to generate unsystematic repertoires for fugitivity.

These include, among others, his striking reflections (written in exile in Ibiza, while recovering from malaria, with most of his books left behind in his Berlin apartment) on the mimetic faculty, which he defines as the “powerful compulsion to become similar [ähnlich zu werden]” (GS2 210; SW2.2 718). This compulsion [Zwang, which he also regards as a “gift,” is a quasi-voluntary ability [Vermögen and not Fähigkeit] to become like something else—a bending of identity toward the other in the thrill of imitation that is neither the rigidity of obedience nor encompassed by the notion of psychic identification (GS2 210; SW2,2 718). This capacity is double-faceted, as it has a performative dimension (of partaking, as in dance, in a transit-via-resemblance), as well as an element of recognition (being able to detect similarities that may not always be sensuous). Benjamin is thoughtful enough to suggest that mimesis itself has a history. And though a brisk look might leave one with the impression that he inscribes this history into the broad template of modernity as decline—a fall from the innocence of youth (which, by the connection he follows Freud in positing between ontogenesis and phylogenesis, would be allied with “primitive” or “ancient peoples”)—he leaves decidedly open whether an historical analysis of this capacity would be a primarily a question of “decay” or “transformation” (GS2 211; SW2.2 721). If a general tendency could be observed, he suggests, in a voice that does not posture as definitive, it “seems determined by the increasing fragility of the mimetic faculty” (GS2 211; SW2.2 721). Perhaps, then, as with aura, one must think of mimesis not in terms of a straightforward diminishment but a heightened precariousness relative to the world.

For mimesis, there are studios of learning. “Children’s play,” he writes, “is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train” (GS2 210; SW2.2 720). His aim, here, is not to look fondly at erroneous belief in a backward glance at a foregone state of innocence; nor to study how toys become an instrument of substitution, standing in for the aggressions and affections that have been re-routed from the world of intersubjective relations. With mimesis—which draws together the power “to produce” similarities with the necessary attunement to them—not only does the false dualism of activity and passivity pass away, but newly wrapped around each other are the two capacities of spontaneity and receptivity—a separated pair that constitutes the primary bifurcation that inaugurates Kant’s First Critique. The space of play is one that admits, rather than punishes, the indistinction between the human and the object. Without assimilation or an act of incorporation (modeled on eating), the mimetic faculty generates—only partially by will or initiative—an embodied likeness with another. These occasions of deep resemblance need not necessarily lead to the drama of self-consciousness’s triumphant emergence: the discomfiting, felt likeness with another that gives rise to murderous rage and sets into motion a process of individuation, which finds temporary resolution in a structure of relational inequality and a form of sociality, whose collective basis is averted violence (Hegel). For Benjamin, episodes of becoming-similar can have a range of outcomes. In his autobiographical writings, they often consummate play, which is a form of learning inextricable from language. “In me,” he recalls of his younger self, “this compulsion acted through words. Not those that made me
similar to well-behaved children, but those that made me similar to dwelling places, furniture, clothes. I was distorted by similarity to all that surrounded me” (GS7 417; SW3 374). Elsewhere, and this is perhaps already portended by young Benjamin, for whom becoming-similar can result in a “distortion,” mimetic behavior could not, in the context of late industrial capital, be a taken as an unequivocal sign of flourishing. Das Passagenwerk is, among other things, his most fraught attempt to reckon with the darker, political dimensions of this phenomenon of experience—of an involuntary likeness to the world of commodified goods. The stakes, he felt, were rather high. His study of the shopping-grounds of the nineteenth-century, as he writes to Adorno in a letter of August 1935, were for him the “only reason not to lose courage in the struggle for existence” (SW3 52).

Throughout his memoirs and theoretical writings, Benjamin endeavors to return us to the perceptual space of children in which the line between person and thing is not so boldly drawn: “Behind a door, he himself is a door,” he writes, in reference to play (GS7 418; SW4 375). Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he attends to sites at which the line becomes perforated by language, which he understands first and foremost as a channel of resemblance. Within the irregular intervals in which inhuman speech breaks through to audibility, he potentiates occasions for unlearning the law that organizes kinship ruthlessly along the axis that separates humans from all the rest and divides, too, acceptable attachment from fetishistic ones.

In order to see how this plays out, let us turn to the autobiographical scene of Berlin Childhood in which the demonic telephone left in the corner of the Berlin household sounds out, infernal, with its interruption of the midday napping hour. Benjamin regarded the psychic determinations of the individual as a floret of a larger, social mode of perception. And so, the telephone, he recalls, was a “menace” not only to the schedule of the household, but also to the “historical era that underwrote and enveloped this siesta” (GS7 391; SW3 350). This childhood vignette, named after and dedicated to “The Telephone,” offers an unparalleled introduction to Benjamin’s philosophy of language, in which utmost primacy is afforded to the medium qua medium:

Auf Tag und Stunde war das Telefon mein Zwillingsbruder. Ich durfte erleben, wie es die Erniedrigungen seiner Erstlingsjahre im Rücken ließ. Denn als Läster, Offenschirm und Zimmerpalme, Konsole, Gueridon und Erkerbrüstung, die damals in den Vorderzimmern prangten, schon längst verdorben und gestorben waren, hielt, einem sagenhaften Helden gleich, der in der Bergschlucht ausgesetzt gewesen, den dunklen Korridor im Rücken lassend, der Apparat den königlichen Einzug in die gelichteten und hellen, nun von einem jüngeren Geschlecht bewohnten Räume….

Nicht viele, die den Apparat benutzen, wissen, welche Verheerungen einst sein Erscheinen in den Familien verursacht hat. Der Lauf, mit dem er zwischen zwei und vier, wenn wieder ein Schulfreund mich zu sprechen wünschte, anschlug, war ein Alarmsignal; das nicht allein die Mittagsruhe meiner Eltern sondern das Zeitalter, in dessen Herzen sie sich ihr ergaben, gefährdete Meinungsverschiedenheiten mit den Ämtern waren die Regel, zu schweigen von den Drohungen und Donnerworten, die mein Vater gegen die Beschwerdestelle ausstieß. Doch seine eigentlichen Orgien galten der Kurbel, der er sich minutenlang und bis zur Selbstvergewisserung verschrieb. Seine Hand war dabei ein Derwisch, den der Taumel überwältigt. Mir schlug das Herz, ich war gewiß, in solchen Fällen drohe der Beamter ihrer Säumigkeit ein Schlag.
In diesen Zeiten hing das Telefon entstellt und ausgestoßen zwischen der Truhe für die schmutzige Wäsche und dem Gasometer in einem Winkel des Hinterkorridors, von wo sein Läuten die Schrecken der berliner Wohnung vervielfachte. Wenn ich dann, meiner Sinne mit Mühe mächtig, nach langem Tasten durch den finstern Schlauch, anlangte, um den Aufruhr abzustellen, die beiden Hörer, welche das Gewicht von Hanteln hatten, abriß und den Kopf dazwischen preßte, war ich gnadenlos der Stimme ausgeliefert, die da sprach. Nichts war, was die Gewalt, mit der sie auf mich eindrang, milderte. Ohnmächtig litt ich, daß sie mir die Besinnung auf meine Zeit, meinen Vorsatz und meine Pflicht zunichte machte; und wie das Medium der Stimme, die von drüben seiner sich bemächtigt, folgt, ergab ich mich dem ersten besten Vorschlag, der durch das Telefon an mich erging. (GS 242-243)

[Each day and every hour, the telephone was my twin brother. I was an intimate observer of the way it rose above the humiliations of its early years. For once the chandelier, firescreen, potted palm, console table, gueridon, and alcove balustrade—all formerly on display in the front rooms—had finally faded and died a natural death, the apparatus, like a legendary hero once exposed to die in a mountain gorge, left the dark hallway in the back of the house to make its regal entry into the cleaner and brighter rooms that now were inhabited by a younger generation…. Now, when everything depended on its call, the strident voice it had acquired in exile was grown softer. Not many of those who use the apparatus know what devastation it once wreaked in family circles. The sound with which it rang between two and four in the afternoon, when a schoolfriend wished to speak to me, was an alarm signal that menaced not only my parents’ midday nap but the historical era that underwrote and enveloped this siesta. Disagreements with the switchboard operators were the rule, to say nothing of the threats and curses uttered by my father when he had the complaints department on the line. But his real orgies were reserved for cranking the handle, to which he gave himself up for minutes at a time, nearly forgetting himself in the process. His hand, on these occasions, was a dervish overcome by frenzy. My heart would pound; I was certain that the employee on the other end was in danger of a stroke, as punishment for her negligence.

At that time, the telephone still hung—an outcast settled carelessly between the dirty-linen hamper and the gasometer—in a corner of the hallway, where its ringing served to multiply the terrors of the Berlin household. When, having mastered my senses with great effort, I arrived to quell the uproar after prolonged fumbling through the gloomy corridor, I tore off the two receivers, which were heavy as dumbbells, thrust my head between them, and was inexorably delivered over to the voice that now sounded. There was nothing to allay the violence with which it pierced me. Powerless, I suffered, seeing that it obliterated my consciousness of time, my firm resolve, my sense of duty. And just as the medium obeys the voice that takes possession of him from beyond the grave, I submitted to the first proposal that came my way through the telephone.] (SW 3 349-350)

Benjamin’s contribution, which resonates with Freud’s helixing of phylogenesis and ontogenesis, is to sound forth, within each other, the individual narrative of coming-of-age and the historical development of material technologies. Both live under the umbrella of “natural history”—a term
that is not to be understood as the ideological sheen that shrouds contingency with the order of the innate and unchanging; the phrase, rather, is Benjamin’s name for a historical process whose first principle is transience. The potted palm and the firescreen die a “natural death.” The mass-produced, the creaturely, the human—none are exempt from the logic of decay.

This episode contains so many of the familiar thematicies associated with processes of European modernization that hastened in the early twentieth century. The telephonic disruption might indeed appear as just another in the catalogue of the thousand shock-experiences of urban life. The advent of new technologies, their incorporation into the private realm, forcibly reorganize the sensorium. Like the potentially erotic jolt of the train-car (Freud) and the newly felt physiological dangers of crossing of the street (Simmel), the piercing, alarm-signal of the handset is received by young Benjamin as a great and strange violence, which disrupts self-continuity and establishes psychic formation in the errant direction of the fitful struggle to come to grips with perceptual disturbance. The device unsettles the familial aikos, interrupting temporal rhythms of rest and reprieve. The telephone—in which the internet lay virtually hidden—erodes the distinction between work and life, and unless unplugged, entails the uninterrupted potential for an intrusion of business at any second of the day. Forms of anonymous sociality—the shouting matches with the switchboard operator—encroach upon the space of intimacy in which the familial bond had before presided in trainquility. The first paragraph dramatizes, too, the reversal through which, like the industrial machinery that puts the laborer to work instead of the other way around, the phone turns the tables, as it were, and “overcomes by frenzy” the patriarch who owns and operates it.

But in Benjamin’s hand, these motifs of alienated living set off unexpected harmonics. The telephone lives a dual identity as disturber of the peace and longtime neglected hero—both a channel of alien currents and a compadre with whom the often unremarkable passage of everyday life is shared. If there is a story within this autobiographical image that illuminates a dimension of collective experience, it is not one that streaks plainly across reminiscences of childhood in a tragic arc, which narrates the rise of technology as a lamentable erosion of the sphere of traditional forms of human activity. Benjamin—who looked upon all things near as if they were coming from a distance, and thus, always encountered the phenomena of study through the proxemics of ambivalence—would see the interruptive potential of the world of commodities as being poised on the brink of both a possible regression and collective awakening.

Within the developmental trajectory that structures the genre of souvenirs de jeunesse, the phone does not play any of the familiar roles afforded to physical objects by the chief twentieth-century psychoanalytic narratives of development. It is not presented here as a prop for the process of self-consolidation. Hardly is it an instrument of material support—the trotte-bébé, which is much depended upon during a state of motor and psychic disorganization, then cast aside after the accomplishment of mastery; nor does it function as a transitional object that facilitates the sequence

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8 Gerhard Richter has written a chapter about Benjamin’s ear, working with an earlier text, Berlin Chronicle. See his Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography (Wayne State University Press, 2002).
10 This reminiscence returns, denuded of its autobiographical source, in his late essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”: “In the mid-nineteenth century, the invention of the match brought forth a number of innovations which have one thing in common: a single abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps. This development is taking place in many areas. A case in point is the telephone, where the lifting of a receiver has taken the place of the steady movement that used to be required to crank the older models” (SW4 328).
of learning through which the child, living in the billows of subjective omnipotence, discovers a sense of external reality. The telephone appears here as kin, as threshold to force, as medium in its own right.

As an essayist, Benjamin often operates in the manner of one of the panoramas whose eye-piece he looked through as a child. Despite his insistence that historical thought crystallizes in monadic form, the principle that implicitly guides his expository method is that no phenomenon can be understood in isolation. Despite the broad recognition of juxtaposition as a force that emanates brightly from his works, his procedure is not to be confused with that of the art historian who places two slides next to each other in order to derive insight from the sight of difference; or even of the surrealist, who unleashes strange proximities by combining incongruous elements within the same picture plane. Even while Benjamin’s prose very often approaches the asymptotic limit of pure image, the relative linearity of the prose medium does not permit a true simultaneity of contrasting visions. Rather, he orchestrates a succession of images, whose arrangement brings to light resemblance, and, thus, a sudden glistening of divergence, which passes before the eye one by one: “the picture would sway within its little frame and then immediately trundle off to the left” (GS4 239; SW3 374). The hermeneutic engagement with his later essays may be, as he intimated of the Arcades, comparable to an encounter with montage. Images are not, in cinema, co-present; rather, tension mounts between image and after-image—what is before us and what has already receded from vision with its ache of departure. His essays—one might look, for instance, to the later sections of “The Work of Art” essay—are propelled by a turning prism of differences, refracted through resemblances that do not polarize into antitheses that are easily metabolized by the dialectical appetite. With regard to the modern phenomenon of the crowd—that is, to those large population flows that do not consolidate into anything as coherent as a class—Benjamin does not speak about this directly, but instead calls forth a series of witnesses: first, Engels’ horror at the “human turmoil” produced by urban concentration, the multitudes united only by their “brutal indifference”; then Poe’s kabuki-like depiction of London’s masses, gesticulating, brows taut, in a manic, involuntary street choreography, which fulfills belatedly, Descartes’s skeptical hypothesis that all the people on the street below might in fact be automata; and Baudelaire’s flâneur, whose fluency with the currents of the street allows him to perform virtuosically an increasingly defunct form of leisure and nonchalance in a sea of haste—to be immersed amidst the moving masses all the while maintaining a dissociation from them: an artful disposition of being in but not of the crowd (SW4 33).

It would not be altogether fruitless to see what this method—this setting into motion a carousel of perspectives—might yield when turned toward the ringing of the telephone. Despite the great extent to which the sensibilities of Benjamin and Proust converge, a decisive difference between them lies in the fact that for Proust, identification with the inanimate is indeed imaginable, but only in those gossamer moments—there, on that foggy peninsula, on which one perambulates from waking life to reading and then once more, to the portmanteau leading to sleep. In the inaugural passage of À la Recherche, Marcel narrates his own diaphanous experience of identity: “I myself seemed actually to have become the subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V.”11 The modes of becoming-inhuman that Benjamin regards as defining experiences of capitalist modernity present, linguistically, as similar to this strain of Proustian etherealism, but are quite differently irradiated with ambivalence. “Je suis un vieux boudoir, plein de roses fanées”—Baudelaire’s identification with old wares is not spun from the fibers of dream, but from waking life.

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in which the hallucinatory quality of sameness has taken hold—via the law of price—as a socially objective condition of daily experience (SW'4 80).

Let us turn to the interval between Guermantes and Berliner Kindheit—to the twenty years that separate them, and separate, too, their respective objects of historical recollection: respectively, the obsolescence of the French aristocracy and the threshold of urban modernity, written at a time when modernity was just about to start feeling late. I quote, as it is only possible to do, at length, from the tributary of Marcel’s reminiscences:

Un matin, Saint-Loup m’avoua, qu’il avait écrit à ma grand’mère pour lui donner de mes nouvelles et lui suggérer l’idée, puisque un service téléphonique fonctionnait entre Doncières et Paris, de causer avec moi. Bref, le même jour, elle devait me faire appeler à l'appareil et il me conseilla d’être vers quatre heures moins un quart à la poste. Le téléphone n’était pas encore à cette époque d'un usage aussi courant qu'aujourd'hui. Et pourtant l'habitude met si peu de temps à dépouiller de leur mystère les forces sacrées avec lesquelles nous sommes en contact que, n'ayant pas eu ma communication immédiatement, la seule pensée que j’eus ce fut que c'était bien long, bien incommode, et presque l'intention d'adresser une plainte. Comme nous tous maintenant, je ne trouvais pas assez rapide à mon gré, dans ses brusques changements, l'admirable fée de laquelle quelques instants suffisent pour qu'apparaisse près de nous, invisible mais présent, l'être à qui nous voulions parler, et qui restant à sa table, dans la ville qu'il habite (pour ma grand'mère c'était Paris), sous un ciel différent du nôtre, par un temps qui n'est pas forcément le même, au milieu de circonstances et de préoccupations que nous ignorons et que cet être va nous dire, se trouve tout à coup transporté à des centaines de lieues (lui et toute l'ambiance où il reste plongé) près de notre oreille, au moment où notre caprice l'a ordonné.

Et aussitôt que notre appel a retenti, dans la nuit pleine d'apparitions sur laquelle nos oreilles s'ouvrent seules, un bruit léger—un bruit abstrait—celui de la distance supprimée—et la voix de l'être cher s'adresse à nous.12

One morning, Saint-Loup confessed that he had written to my grandmother to give her news of me and to suggest that, since there was a telephone service between Doncières and Paris, she might like to speak to me. In short, she was going to give me a call, and he advised me to be at the post office at about a quarter to four. The telephone was not so commonly used then as it is today. And yet habit is so quick to demystify the sacred forces with which we are in contact that, because I was not connected immediately, my only reaction was to see it as all very time-consuming and inconvenient, and to be on the point of lodging a complaint: like everybody nowadays, I found it too slow for my liking, with its abrupt transformations, this admirable magic that needs only a few seconds to bring before us, unseen but present, the person to whom we wish to speak, and who, seated at his table, in the town he inhabits (in my grandmother’s case, Paris), under another sky than our own, in weather that is not necessarily the same, amid circumstances and preoccupations that are unknown to us and which he is about to reveal, finds himself suddenly transported hundreds of miles (he and all the surroundings in which he remains

12 Marcel Proust, La cité de Guermantes (Nouvelle Revue Française, 1920), 120. Hereafter cited as C.
immersed) to within reach of our hearing, at a particular moment dictated by our whim.

And as soon as our call has rung out, in the darkness peopled with apparitions to which our ears alone are opened, a shred of sound—an abstract sound—the sound of distance suppressed—and the voice of the dear one speaks to us.] (R 127)

Apropos of the Proustian touch of Endlessness, which makes everything out of the nothing of the incidental, the banal is transformed retrospectively, so that the sacred effloresces from profane spaces, profane transactions. A characteristically long sentence sets alight the work of reenchantment: Marcel’s habituated impatience lifts, giving way to an homage to the forgotten splendors of the telephone—a technology of nearness, which transports, according to our caprice, whole places in an instant, in an annihilation of space by time, as Marx would have put it. The reverie quickly turns into mythic rapture, as he fantasizes that the line of connection is maintained by grace of the Danaids, who “transmit to one another the urns of sound.” The operators are beatified as the “Priestesses of the Invisible”: “les Desmoiselles du téléphone!” (C 120). This mania—inspired by the technological augmentation of the romantic predicament of the beloved’s distant proximity—deflates into non-fulfillment:

Ce jour-là, hélas, à Doncières, le miracle n’eut pas lieu. Quand j’arrivai au bureau de poste, ma grand’mère m’avait déjà demandé; j’entrai dans la cabine, la ligne était prise, quelqu’un causait qui ne savait pas sans doute qu’il n’y avait personne pour lui répondre car, quand j’aménai à moi le récepteur, ce morceau de bois se mit à parler comme Polichinelle; je le fis taire, ainsi qu’au guignol, en le remettant à sa place, mais, comme Polichinelle, dès que je le ramenais près de moi, il recommençait son bavardage. Je finis, en désespoir de cause, en racrochant définitivement le récepteur, par étouffer les convulsions de ce tronçon sonore qui jacassa jusqu’à la dernière seconde et j’allai chercher l’employé qui me dit d’attendre un instant…. (C 121)

Alas, that afternoon in Doncières the miracle did not take place. When I arrived at the post office, my grandmother had already put in her call; I stepped into the booth, the line was engaged, somebody was speaking who probably did not realize that there was nobody there to answer him, for as I took the receiver, the dead piece of wood began to speak like Punchinello; I silenced it, as I would a puppet, by putting it back on its hook, but, like Punchinello, as soon as I picked it up again it went on with its chatter. I eventually gave up in despair, hung up the receiver for good to stifle the convulsions of this vociferous stump that kept up its chatter to the very end, and went off in search of the telephonist, who advised me to wait awhile…

Common to the Weltanschauungen of Proust and Benjamin is a fierce magnetism that draws the sphere of everyday experience away from the thesis that modernity sentences the world to disenchantment. At the same time, they hold in view—with jewel-like precision—scenes of subjective confrontation with processes of modernization, in such a way that indicates, like the lurch of a weather vane that belies atmospheric patterns otherwise accessible only by way of abstraction, how the sensorium is trained and reorganized on a collective scale. Benjamin finds a correlate to Marx’s category of the mode of production in the notion of variable modes of perception (SW4 255). He begins the “Work of Art” essay by making explicit the view, which he is not alone in holding, that superstructural transformations lag behind changes to the conditions of economic production.
If Marx provided a diagnosis of capitalism while it was still in its infancy, half a century longer was required for such alterations to become manifest and pervasive in the sphere of culture. Benjamin’s theoretical practice of forming constellations is aptly named: like the astronomer’s studied observation of astral bodies, gazing toward cultural phenomena that were perceptible and available to view would yield knowledge of things that had already come to pass.

The lineaments of these two scenarios of Benjamin and Proust can be marked for their resemblance. The two protagonists are defined, even in their early years, by their lack of strength relative to the world; and from the start, they understand themselves to be subjects of fragile constitution, prone to illness and to sudden bouts of powerlessness. The defining narrative gesture common to them both involves arresting the course of the ordinary and, without transcending it, converting it into an occasion of wonderment, estrangement. In these episodes, in which the backward glance does the work of de-habitation, one discovers testimonies—decidedly on the scale of the minute—to recent alterations in the field of the prosaic, shifts in experience that might easily fall under the shadow of that too-large and vague rubric of modern alienation. Their pages offer a record of the partitioning of the senses: the early encounter with the isolation of the voice, which, newly detached from face and flesh, is projected across distances in a strangely disembodied form of social intercourse, which arouses feelings that are hardly unalloyed. For both, the voice, mediated by the telephone, is disarming. The apparatus returns the familial, though in a disquieting, alien form.

But, of course, important contrasts begin to announce themselves. Marcel’s is an age in which one must still venture out to the post office to take a call, whereas, for young Walter, the telephone has already become partially integrated into the private realm as a household good that increasingly cannot be lived without and can erupt at any moment, even during the hiatus from the hours of commerce. There is, moreover, a different affective key struck: Marcel travels the axis of mounting-anticipation/sudden disappointment; Benjamin courses the less linear tremors of the self’s dispossession.

The patience that has been so far asked of the reader, in lingering with these episodes and settling into their resemblance, will at last be recompensed with a rounder sense of how, within this shared topos of literary modernism—its common thematics and preoccupations, its narrative inclinations toward the minor, its investment in the erratic temporalities of memory—there is something in Benjamin’s thought that beams with peculiarity. While this aspect is not ultimately reducible to a question of personal sensibility or of an individual art of existence—as Foucault suggests of Baudelaire—we catch a glimpse of it through the autobiographical. It is a difference that reflects, if not a decisive historical shift, then responses to capitalist modernity that are distinct. Expressed in negative form: Benjamin never could never have written the lines about Polichinelle—would not have portrayed the telephone in such a light of comic degradation. Proust puts the apparatus in its place, typecasting it as the laughing-stock of the commedia dell’arte, the poor buffoon from the countryside, rude, running around with macaroni and a wooden spoon, incapable of discourse, only bavardage. For Benjamin, to be a puppet was never to be merely so. Mussolini, Benjamin observes, made it a point to ban marionettes (GB 103). And, in a 1929 radio broadcast for children, Benjamin cast his own voice over the airwaves to announce the following: “All great puppeteers maintain that the secret of the trade is actually to let the puppet have its way, to yield to it” [der Puppe ihren eigenen Willen zu lassen, ihr nachzugeben]. In Kleist’s view, Benjamin goes on to say,

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the puppeteer must, in his own fibers, comport himself thoroughly like a dancer if the right motions in the puppet are to be achieved (RB 20; GS7 83). He must, in other words, be well versed in the art of giving himself over to mimesis.

The aspect of Benjamin’s thought that I am ushering to the foreground is, in short, an attentiveness to things, whose philosophical dimensions exceed that of subjective intention toward them. One discovers, among the subheadings within Berliner Kindheit, “Cabinets,” “The Sewing Box,” “The Sock,” “The Victory Column,” “The Desk,” “The Larder.” The contents of his childhood chronicle are those one might expect to find in a department store catalogue. The more his reflections border on becoming an homage to the articles of a material past, the more closely calibrated his writing becomes to the wavelength of advertising, which his thought resembles, but decidedly does not coincide. “But of all the things I used to mimic,” he recalls, “my favorite was the Chinese porcelain. A mottled crust overspread those vases, bowls, plates, and boxes, which, to be sure, were merely cheap export articles” (GS4 262; SW3 393). Though Benjamin shared with Nietzsche a penchant for sinophilia, there is in this remark, not only a show of exoticism but also an indication that his fondness for objects—though kindled in the milieu of consumer society—nonetheless runs counter to the system of valuation imposed by a world market.

One may recall that from the standpoint of Marcel, the telephone may, in the course of his musings, be imbued with a mythic glow. But never will he look upon the apparatus as anything other than something that either draws him nearer or impedes him from reaching the target of his affections. Never would he confuse the device for his kin; it remains, rather, a depot along the way to human intimacy. When the telephone works, it is magic; when it disappoints, the receiver becomes, more soberly, little more than a piece of wood, a “vociferous stump,” whose chattering must be silenced. In contrast to Marcel’s rather monogamous ear—which cannot tolerate any but the voice of the beloved—Benjamin finds himself perilously receptive to whomever, whatever, comes through the line.

More broadly, it seems that “The Telephone” presents a world in which intersubjectivity short-circuits. The voice from the other end remains unidentified, perhaps unidentifiable. He says nothing of the friends who are trying to reach him. And nobody manages to speak to the person with whom he intends to communicate. It is true that the familial frame structures the episode and indeed the whole genre in which it participates: paternal rage looms heavy over the affective economy of the household, and the absent maternal presence finds an anonymous surrogate in the remote and feminized operator, who has won Benjamin’s sympathies from a distance. And yet, the emphasis of the scene as a whole falls equally, if not less, on the interpersonal than on the encounter with the means of communication. The telephone becomes a character, if not the protagonist, of this coming-of-age narrative. The autobiographical I is momentarily forgotten—its consciousness, itself-reflexivity of intention and duty, suspended.

Affirming his kinship with the outcast instrument is a way to make its significance freshly legible. In a rewriting of the psychoanalytic grammar of the bourgeois family, Benjamin allows the trajectories of identification to run errant: they are not primarily organized in the upward direction of the superegoic patriarch, but run transversally toward the brother-thing, the inhuman semblable. By the second paragraph, he becomes telephone-identified. In keeping with a 1936 fragment, in which he suggests that the mimetic faculty tests itself first on the body (SW3 253), this object-identification has a distinct somatic dimension: he nests his head between two receivers, which become his ears. By the end of the vignette, the metamorphosis is nearly total, as he becomes himself a medium (GS6
The conventions of the literary memoir predispose his readers to identify themselves with the first-person narrator—in this case, an I who ceaselessly becomes something else, an I whose continuity is repeatedly interrupted. One could read this “breaking in upon” [eindrangen] the subject as a testament to alienation in the purely pejorative sense. But the scene of possession does not seem unequivocally to signal the bankruptcy of modern shock experience or the pain of a traumatic incursion that is rerouted from the words of the father, which are compared to a physical blow. More ambiguously, the force that does not entirely annihilate the I, but undoes its consciousness of time, duty, and intention offers a recess from the closed circuit of self-relation—a reprieve that is made possible by an unexpected solidarity with an inhuman other.

Eschewing the Freudian tendency to centrifuge stories into the dyadic and often murderous drama between father and son, Benjamin’s anecdote imagines a structure of feeling that is not exclusively governed by the ambivalent bond with the paternalistic figure of domination, and the subsequent substitutions for the father that appear in later life—resurfing, often forcefully, in a more explicitly political context. No doubt, the social dynamics of obedience would not be far from Benjamin’s mind. The wistful tone of the piece makes it easy to forget that these memoirs were composed during the years when the Nazi party took over the German state and began its campaign for “National Renewal”; established the first camp at Dachau; and implemented its severe constriction of sociality through genocidal policies that targeted, among the more familiar minoritized groups, the “asocial” and the “work-shy” (arbeitsscheu). That such a dreamy text, written in exile, could maintain itself in the fragile nimbus of childhood experience—during such a dark moment—is difficult to fathom. Although these reminiscences may seem sheltered, if not peculiarly heedless of their historical circumstances, there is perhaps no more deeply embedded trace of them—albeit a negative trace that is enveloped in own force of prognostication—than in the tenacity of his affection for the detritus left behind by civilizing projects, which sought to consolidate a sphere proper to the human race.

“Everything that Benjamin said or wrote,” Adorno reflects, “sounded as if though, instead of rejecting the promises of…children’s books with its usual disgraceful ‘maturity,’ took them so literally that real fulfillment itself was now within sight of knowledge.” Indeed, Benjamin’s philosophy does little to inure itself from being laughed off. The credence he gives to those marginal experiences that do not attain to fully developed reason, which is, at the same time, a refusal to cede truth to Enlightenment disenchantment, was a spirit he kept close until the very end: for some years, Benjamin referred to the _Arcade_, which he regarded as his most important work, as a “Dialectical Fairytale.” In the face of such radical naivété, one might think the ephemeral moments of being in which childhood fancy does not yet know how to be discriminating in its social bonds is entirely out of proportion to the devastating reality of a necropolitical order that decides too well, too efficiently, on those who are subject to death. Or perhaps, a voice of reason insists that the elective affinity with the telephone is merely a detour to proper attachment, or a displacement that ultimately needs straightening out into a more appropriate investment in a politics properly focused on human sociality.

I wish only to emphasize the following: the endgame of Benjamin’s literary experiment is not simply to reorganize the chain of being, so that the utter, the telephone, the butterfly, would be elevated above the threshold of recognition beyond which one can legitimately claim a right to shelter from violence. The task—a non-teleological and likely interminable one—is, rather, to blast open the

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14 _Prisms_, 230.
structure and perceived necessity of a prior, thanatopolitical determination of what is admitted into the field of relationality. He achieves this, in part, by the force of surprise. And, if we lay hold of what is implicit in Adorno’s remark, such a disruption of anthropocentrism will manifest in terms of a hermeneutic crisis of literality.

The jolt to self-continuity, the propensity for becoming-similar associated with the nearly forgotten optic of the child, and the irruption of speech from the inhuman—these are vital to, but hardly exhaust, the force of propulsion within Benjamin’s thought, which sends tremors through schemata of ontological rigidification.

This potentially destructive endeavor bears an affinity to his “Critique of Violence,” in which he moves past the question of what forms of violence are justifiable to ask instead—toes deeper into the ground—in what ways the justificatory schema used to adjudicate the proper use of force might themselves might be implicated in a violence of their own. In a similar fashion, the issue at hand is simply a redemption of the species that have been shut out—so as to bring them into the warm light of protection from the torture that is minted as scientific knowledge, from being bred to be slaughtered, from the slower violence that impedes subsistence. This critique—whose value in the field of political praxis is incalculable even though there can be no certain trading house, no established protocol for cashing that value in—allows (dis)identification and sociality to return to us as a more genuinely open question, one that does not proleptically condemn what is not (yet) or never will consummate itself as a who. Such a critique, in short, travels below the surface of the visible, the sayable, and like a burrow, interrupts, shoots and scatters into the air, the vast infrastructure of biological causations—not least of which is the staggering one that separates the living from the inorganic.

III. On Language as Such

To reprise what is crystallized in “The Telephone”: Benjamin’s peculiar response to a society increasingly subsumed by instrumental rationality is to avow resemblance with the instrument par excellence. This extra-voluntary feat of mimesis is far from a process of cultivated assimilation. It involves, rather, a sometimes jarring suspension of identity’s consistency, one that simultaneously disables the coherence of self-assertion (1 = 1) and potentiates a moment of confusion that is the I, kaleidescoped into sensuous heterogeneity. Would there be anything, one might ask, to distinguish such a phenomenon from shock experience [Chockerlebnis], which Benjamin identifies as the norm established by capitalist modernity? Would this insistence on the ego’s disruption be anything other than a confirmation of the thesis that the price exacted from the subject for its emergence is a founding trauma? How, outside of the space of recollected childhood, might such a resemblance manifest?

In an effort to see these questions through, the subsequent portion of this chapter’s argument will decompress what lies within the following remark, which appears in the same section in which Benjamin recounts how in his younger years, of all things he liked to mimic, his favorite was the Chinese porcelain, to which he would become similar, entering into a “cloud of colors,” much like the legendary painter who invited his friends to see his new painting, and much to their surprise, disappeared, only to be found taking a stroll along the path represented within his picture: “The gift of perceiving similarities is, in fact, nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become
similar and to behave mimaetically. In me, this compulsion acted through words” (GS 261; SW 4374).

It is telling that “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933) was originally entitled “Zur Sprachtheorie.” In Benjamin’s thinking, language is a reservoir—one of the last remaining and most fecund—of the increasingly fragile and forgotten capacity to discern similarities and participate in them. Such participation, one might add, is bodily, and draws from the broad well of the senses, which are scarcely limited to five.

Rejecting the conception of language as conventional, and thus, distinguishing his philosophy from all that would later in the century enter into the fold of Saussuerian linguistics, Benjamin reveals, over the course of his lifetime, a view of language in which human production—and the whole gamut that spans authorship, spontaneity, custom, and structure—are features only as a part. Indeed, the opening gesture of Benjamin’s 1916 essay, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” [“On Language as Such and on Human Language”] is, from the very start of the title, to inaugurate a di-remption between human language and language in the more general sense. Part of our task becomes, then, to discover how a notion of language could be any broader than the already sweeping formulation, Sprache des Menschen.

This early essay will be revisited in the final chapter, which listens more closely for the elegiac current in Benjamin’s linguistic theory, as it resonates with Woolf’s literary experiments in narrating inhuman lament. But within the context of the discussion more immediately before us, a consideration of Benjamin’s early reflections on language will act as the necessary groundwork for an inquiry that moves us closer toward the convergence of historical materialism and phenomena that are conventionally located in the discipline of literary studies. The latter come together, like the joints of an uncertain wishbone, in the notion of “empathy with the commodity” [Einfühlung in die Ware], which occupied Benjamin toward the end of his life, but, like the Arcades, remained unfinished and has been transmitted to us largely in fragmentary form. Benjamin composed “Über Sprache” before his pivotal romance with Asja Lacies, a director of revolutionary puppet theater for children, who introduced him to much that would have a lasting effect on him, including Brecht. This is to say that this essay predates his more substantive engagement with Marxist thought. In the course of Benjamin’s scholarly reception, many have identified the incompatibilities between three distinct phases of his work, which, as Buck-Morss points out, correspond to the tidal pull of certain friendships: the theological (Scholem); the materialist (Brecht); and the sublation of the two (Adorno).

Shaking his ideas loose from this stagist conception, I would like to suggest that his early work in disclosing the extra-anthropic dimensions of language, while certainly not Marxist in its provenance, proved to be a vital resource for his later efforts to redefine historical materialism, in part by loosening it from the hold of anthropo-narcissism. What, in the 1916 essay, seems at times almost an untenably capacious view of language affords room for a vision of high capitalism, seen from the standpoint of the commodity. As the next chapter will show, this view from below, as it were, is something that Marx will admit, but makes it a point to regulate—one might even say, to police, as a site of irrational delusion, which he associates with the misty regions of the religious, non-European elsewhere. The historical nexus in which the Arcades material dwells is structured by the following tension: partly through the technical domination of the natural world, which, in the nineteenth century, reaches a peak, at which a vision of decline can be glimpsed, industrial capitalism estranges humans from all that is not human; at the same time, one of the determinants of social life is the
experience of indistinction with the object-world, which not the result of an individual hallucination but is objectively produced. Redeployed in this context, elements of Benjamin’s philosophy of language are imbued with new significance—not least of which is a vocabulary for speaking of encounters with the animacy of the inhuman world, as it emerges through the medium of the word.

All that could be said about Benjamin’s “Über Sprache überhaupt” is, like his conception of linguistic transmission, potentially infinite. My remarks here will limit themselves to the task of assembling the requisite materials for studying how and why it is largely through poetics that Benjamin reworks the theory of the commodity’s phantasmagoria; and why, moreover, it is through a reappraisal of lyric productivity that he most forcibly challenges the primacy of human praxis, which remains largely unquestioned in Marx’s thought.

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In order to understand what Benjamin hears when things suddenly speak—a hearing that he wishes to make readable—we must first have some notion of what it is to speak, what languages might be being spoken, and what is meant by “language” in the first place.

Scarcely can the slightest of these inquiries be settled in any comprehensive way. But an approach may be made, I will suggest, by reading “The Telephone” as a belatedly written propaedeutic to Benjamin’s philosophy of language. For within this moment of these childhood mémoires, his philosophy, which brings to a halt the forward march of instrumentalized speech, is not so much explicated as it is staged. The telephone, one witnesses, speaks most forcefully when it is not being properly used.

It is significant that a vignette whose title announces its dedication to the thematic of communication does not disclose a single word of what is being said. Direct discourse is entirely absent. The narrator does provide, in three instances, a clue about the kind of rhetorical address to which we, looking in on the bourgeois interior, are made witnesses. Threats and words of thunder [Donnerworten] predominate his father’s transaction; and Benjamin finds himself susceptible to a proposal, a suggestion [Vorschlag]—something in the family of the imperative—whose contents are left unspecified and out of earshot. This textual omission produces a focal adjustment, which enacts the theoretical reorientation that Benjamin elsewhere seeks to effect. Against the presumption that language is an implement for transmitting messages that are separable from it, Benjamin goes even further than McLuhan’s emphasis on mediation, to insist that language has no content at all.

The way in which what is said in conversation recedes into the background finds a theoretical correlate in the central thesis of Benjamin’s 1916 essay—namely that “language” is not to be understood as a means [Mittel], but as a medium [Medium]. This contrast, in turn, pivots on two prepositions: what is imparted through language is opposed to what is imparted in language. The former, which he rebukes as symptomatic of a fundamentally bourgeois mentality, makes language into an apparatus subordinated to human purposes, including the traffic and trade of information and the relay of factual subject matter in a restrictively intersubjective context. The latter, by

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contrast, regards communication as immanent in language. Language is not at the disposal of the speaker. Rather, it consummates expression that does not issue exclusively from the human world and its tenebrous regions of unconscious thought.

Benjamin’s elliptical reflections on language comprise one of his earliest sustained attempts to critique the means-ends framework that buttresses instrumental rationality and, simultaneously, to posit, as a hopeful alternative, the existence of a realm of “pure means”—that is, a field of activity *cum* manifestation that would be disarticulated from any predetermined end. “On Language as Such” acts as the groundwork, or better yet, a testing ground, for the extension of his critique of instrumentality to the more explicitly political question of violence, which he takes up five years later. In this later essay, he makes a relevant contrast between the partial and the general strike, the latter of which is referred to as an “unalloyed means”—a radical break that is unmixed with an end, and thus, unassimilable to any justificatory schema. The former is carried out, in the manner of extortion, in the service of a limited gain (i.e. withholding labor in order to secure a wage raise), whereas the latter is an act that “not so much causes as consummates” [nicht sowohl veranlaßt all vielmehr vollzieht] (GS1 184; SW7 246).

Very often in Benjamin’s work, the full significance of medium *qua* medium is not asserted in positive form but is given presentation via a narration of a teleological sequence, which is set in motion, only to be subsequently interrupted. If an account of communicative reason posits a causal trajectory from intention to expression, with language acting as the mediating device and rationality as the guarantor of safe transit, Benjamin’s theory of language might be said to derail the intentional aim of human speech, to hold up the realization of the communiqué’s arrival. Instead, he lingers with the medium—attends to the passage itself—until this stalling ceases to be a stalling, and becomes instead a manifestation that reconfigures, lets fall away like a calendar suddenly dropped to the floor, the logico-temporal schema to which experience was previously bound.

In this respect, Benjamin’s view distinguishes itself from comparable arguments found elsewhere in Frankfurt School thought. Over and above a reprimand of instrumental rationality, he cultivates a special regard for the medium, as that which does not deliver anything beyond itself. This predilection for what does not yield profit recurs across several texts, and is most explicitly politicized in the “Technical Reproducibility” essay.¹⁶ There, he proposes that his aesthetic categories, unlike those of genius and creativity, are wholly unusable for the ends of fascism [sie für die Zwecke des Faschismus vollkommen unbrauchbar sind] (GS3 2.4 473). A question introduced by his work pertains to the limitations of strategies of resistance that are predicated on the act of making materials resistant to appropriation. Would such an inoculation from usefulness be able to withstand processes of capitalization, which over the course of the century, range further and further beyond the ambit of use-value, so that ultimately, even garbage can be made to turn a profit? Could non-instrumentality become something other than a defensive response to what threatens to overtake it? Could such a determinate negation become otherwise? Could it somehow exceed the coordinates of a contest of survival?

As I have already intimated, “The Telephone” is exemplary of Benjamin’s attentiveness to the non-functional, which expresses itself structurally in the narrative weight he grants his “twin brother,” and affectively, in the tenderness with which he details its stature and topographical position within the household economy. Performing a form of cultural work akin to that which Benjamin ascribes

¹⁶ See also “Try to Ensure That Everything in Life has a Consequence,” in SW 2.2, 686.
to the collector, the story frees the instrument of communication from the curse of functionality, allowing it to become a leading player. In Benjamin’s hands, the telephone becomes thoroughly unemployable. It frustrates productive speech, thwarts the measured rest and industry of his father Emil, a banker for whom linguistic transactions would have been implicated in financial exchange. In the frenzy in which the patriarch loses himself in the course of operating the machinery, we catch a glimpse of the harrowing, yet comedic potential of a medium that impedes its own efficient instrumentalization.

Worth emphasizing, here, is that the suspension of instrumental language-use as the dominant paradigm of communication is necessarily linked to the disarming of the intentional subject. In other words, the vignette’s success in rewriting the topos of technological communication, so that the medium takes primacy over what is conveyed through it, depends on putting out of play subjective will as the determining force that motivates the scene. The overcoming of the bourgeois conception of language, which is put forth in the 1916 essay as a theoretical proposition, is staged diegetically, as the head of household, swept up in the orgy with the handle-crank, succumbs to a trance of self-forgetting [Selbstvergessenheit]. A mode of speaking that demonstrates verbal command over the object is given over to decomposure of the subject. What is captured in this image of childhood differs substantively from the perceptual recalibration that Heidegger associates with tool-being, such that when equipment is ready-to-hand and put to a task, it vanishes from view; and when it breaks down, it becomes newly conspicuous and available for contemplation. The crux of Benjamin’s scene exceeds the phenomenological problematic of whether objects of utility are noticed, and how they take on various appearances when focalized from different positions. Perforating the forward momentum conventionally generated by narratives of acculturation, Benjamin’s image follows a wayward temporality that cannot be fully assimilated into a trajectory of regression. The story hinges, in other words, less on the vicissitudes of subjective perception than on very prospect of the subject’s undoing. “[J]ust as the medium obeys the voice that takes possession of him from beyond the grave, I submitted to the first proposal that came my way through the telephone”: in this final line, the Ich (and ego), which, to recall once more, Benjamin made a rule never to use in writing, appears, only to lose itself to the unbinding powers of the voice. In a moment of decreation, the self is wrested from its own consciousness [Besinnung]—its ability to stabilize itself as a principal point of reference with respect to time. Loosed, too, is the grip of its self-fastening onto the surety of willed intention [Vorsatz]; vanished suddenly is any command over itself—the self-initiated and -directed power to bind itself reflexively to duty [Pflicht], which, in the Kantian view, is the structure of consciousness that produces the moral subject and allows it to carry through its deeds to execution, in a fulfilment of personal responsibility.

This overriding of the ego’s own and proper consideration breaks apart the fixation on the Ich, which arguably holds together the genre of autobiographical writing. Indeed, the very possibility of autobiography, insofar as it relies on some minimal capacity for self-reflection, is threatened by de-subjectivation. The vignette drops off, one may note, without a recuperative moment that redeems the harrowing experience into a lesson learned and assimilates it as a resource of experience. The panoramic structure of Berliner Kindheit—with its discrete and discontinuous images that do not progress but rather, like the slender and manifold faces of a blooming quartz, become more replete when seen in each other’s company—sets the text free from the imperative of continuity. What appears is the I as it passes into non-sovereignty—an I that is dispossessed of the proper. As can be heard, rustling in the overture’s epigraph borrowed from Celan, the thought—no doubt disorienting—of self’s release into self-forgetting draws to the surface questions whose address and direction may be beyond the I to establish: but where?
in what place?

with what? as what?

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In place, now, is an initial understanding of how Benjamin’s non-instrumental view of language brings to the fore the expressive potential that lies immanent within a medium and concurrently sets aside the human subject of intentionality as the determinant of communication’s meaning. This theoretical dynamic was seen dramatized, in the way Benjamin harnesses the significance cathedected onto the I in the context of the autobiography—only to transform the subject who would speak his intention into a medium that would, as it were, be expressed. These two elements are not coincidentally present but are necessarily entwined, as each cannot be realized without the other. This necessity derives in part from the historical exigencies of Western modernity. Although the overarching framework of “On language as such” is explicitly metaphysical, Benjamin’s account responds to, and explicitly mounts resistance against, the subordination of language to a secular order, in which all, including nature, lies at the disposal of human ratio, which is deaf to anything that it does not itself speak.

With this preliminary foothold in his early writings secured, I would like to bring into view a pair of textual connections that do not so much bridge as flash into proximity reputedly disparate regions of his theological and materialist thought. My aim in doing so is not to enforce a developmental continuity across his ideas, but to open up space in which one might perceive more fully the mutual implications of his linguistic philosophy and his effort to wrest objecthood from its equation with degradation.

To the modern ear, the phrase “human language” belies a redundancy that Benjamin endeavors to make meaningful. Human speech, what he calls a naming-language, is only a special case of language in general, of which all things take part. One may recall that in the 1916 essay, language and communication [Mitteilung] are broken free from their restriction to verbal signs, soundable symbols. There are, he maintains, languages of sculpture, justice, and poetry, all of which are irreducible to the technical idiom that might be employed in each of these occupations. For Benjamin, language is coextensive not only with human expression but with—he holds nothing back here—“absolutely everything” (GS 2:140; SW 1:62). In statements like these, which appear throughout the essay, Benjamin’s notion of language becomes so replete that it verges on emptying itself.

I would like to mark how variations of the near-evacuation of a plenitude, which arises when the closure of anthroponarcissism is resisted, recur within this study. In a way, they reflect differently longer standing theoretical dilemmas of inclusion and enclosure, such as the one we find in Derrida’s commentary on Bataille’s distinction between a restricted and general economy.17 Sometimes only a camel’s hair separates the distinction between the self-forgetfulness of mimetic resemblance, in which one ceaselessly gets lost in world whose elements cannot be looked upon without passing into them—and its, opposite, the prodigious lens of narcissism, which, like an imperial cloud, casts the structure of self-reflexivity over everything, turning all into an imagistic double of the beholder. This ambivalence resurfaces once more in Benjamin’s endeavor to open up

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language—that is, to present an account unrestricted to the human economy of use. The broadness of inclusion risks transformation into an empty universal: “There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents [geistigen Inhalten]. The use of the word “language” is in no way metaphorical” (GS 140-141; SWF 62). The staggering level of generality—one of many aspects that has made this essay particularly obscure—is compounded further by what may come off as an uncharacteristic tone of apodictic certainty. The argument does not, in other words, develop by means of image, proof, or even persuasion, but often by a succession of declarations that seem to require further explanation, but instead are driven home by a repetition that may look like sheer insistence:

Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question “What does language communicate” is therefore “All language communicates itself.” The language of this lamp, for example, communicates not the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is communicable, is by no means the lamp itself) but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression. For in language the situation is this: The linguistic being of all things is their language. The understanding of linguistic theory depends on giving this proposition a clarity that annihilates even the appearance of tautology. This proposition is untautological, for it means, “That which in a mental entity is communicable is its language. (GS 142; SWF 63)

Benjamin struggles—and, indeed, there is a struggle here—to wrest his statements away from the borderlands of both meaninglessness and figure. Periodically, he interrupts his own line of thought to insist on a hermeneutic clarification: this is not metaphor, this is not anthropomorphism, this is not tautology—the implication being that all too readily, his statements might appear as though they fail to reach anything outside of their own circularity. His rhetorical operation of emphatic insistence is related to his conviction that language can only impart itself—that is, that its meaning does not chiefly lie in something external but is consummate with itself as medium. And so, this claim—that language can say “no more” than what itself communicates—draws the argument toward a form of proposition that, in order to make its point, must vacate from the sentence predicative content. Language does not say that…; rather, it says. In Benjamin’s view, nothing could rush into fill in the ellipses; the object must be left blank if not altogether unhinged. This contentlessness should not, however, be confused with a linguistic hermeticism. It is not as though there is no outside of the text, nothing external to the structure of language, but that language is thought to be radically outside the ambit of human convention.

This anticipatory anxiety about the likelihood of misrecognition—that language, especially when issuing from the inhuman, might be interpreted as merely figural—will return, in a different guise, in the following section. Looking ahead for a brief moment, I would like to mark that this dis-identification from the figural differs from what we will later encounter in Marx’s effort to mitigate against figuration on the grounds of its spurious misattribution of agency to the inert world of things. Benjamin’s warding off of the tropological is hardly aimed at sobering up illusory projection; rather, he is striving to open theoretical consideration to what is beyond the human, but without capturing the latter by the force of denotation or as an object of scientific knowledge. What is at stake, in this enlarged scope of language is the “concrete totality of experience,” which is a phrase he uses in “The Program of the Coming Philosophy” to gloss “religion”—a term that, in his usage,
seems not altogether incompatible with more recent conceptions of the “planetary” as the horizon of political thought (GS1 170; SW1 105).

This opening, in turn, discomposes the relation between ground and figure, along with the very criteria by which the figural would itself be distinguished from the plane of literal meaning. In an effort to distinguish his own vocabulary from that of theosophy, Benjamin makes a remark, some twelve years later, that bears an affinity to the earlier cited statement about the omnipresence of language. “[G]enuine aura,” he asserts, “appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things, as people imagine.”¹⁸ We must remember that Benjamin was a scholar oriented toward the meticulousness of philology; inclined, as an historian, toward the finest ephemeral detail; and when possible, kept to the scale of the minute—a propensity, one might add, matched by his small handwriting. The anomalously uncompromising magnitude of these two statements, written more than a decade apart, draws them toward each other. To be sure, this affinity is more of a clue than certain proof. But given his admission that “words, too, have an aura their own,” it is not unlikely that, when understood in this enlarged sense, aura—which he associates with the ability, typically limited to the sphere of human relation, to “look back”—harbors an intimate connection to “language as such,” which names the potentially startling ability of all things “animate or inanimate” to speak back (GS1.1 647; SW4 354). In short, the attentiveness to an object’s aura may share a deep current with poetry, whose wellspring, he suggests in the footnote on Kraus, lies in the conferred power to lift one’s eyes. Though less fully elaborated than the mutual implications of the alleged atrophy of aura and the simultaneous advancements in technologies of visual imaging, the vital link between language, as a medium of mimesis, and the startling reciprocity with the inhuman that characterizes auratic experience may be a keystone of Benjamin’s account of modernity that has yet to be sounded out.

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I have so far suggested that Benjamin challenges the presumption that language acts as a vehicle for conveying truth-content—even going so far as to say that language has no content. I then observed a tension that emerges within his prose, as he advances a conception of language that relieves it from the task of carrying any subjectively introduced content, while at the same time, insisting emphatically that such language is not empty.

This negative moment of Benjamin’s argument—his blasting open of the instrumental conception of language—is neither a reduction to a void nor a synthesis of an internal contradiction. Rather, once the presumed unity between language and human language is torn asunder, new possibilities come to light. He goes on to posit the existence of “nameless, non-acoustic languages, languages which issue from matter.” “Here,” he continues, “we should recall the material community of things in their communication [die material Gemeinsamkeit der Dinge in ihrer Mitteilung]” (GS2 156; SW1 67). He writes this rather enigmatic line in 1916, but, as I would like to suggest, it is not until 1933 that he offers a gloss on what this term might mean. “Language,” he writes in “The Doctrine of the Similar” [“Lehre vom Ähnlichen”], is the “highest application of the mimetic faculty—a medium into which the earlier perceptual capacity for recognizing the similar had, without residue, entered to such an extent that language now represents the medium in which objects encounter and come into relation with one another” (GS2 409; SW2.2 697). On the question of what mimesis might entail in

this instance, we may recall that for Benjamin, language constitutes an archive of nonsensuous similarities [unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeiten] (GS 2 409; SW 2.2 697). This condition of being unable to be registered, he makes clear, is not to be interpreted in any absolute sense, but is relative to a history of the sensorium, over the course of which, certain connections—say, between a star and a human life (his example)—have fallen out of the range of our perceptibility. Much as a joke too well explained wilts into humorlessness, a resemblance cannot be built up by way of syllogistic construction; nor can it, via induction or observation, be stabilized as an item to be deposited into the inventory of knowledge. The detection of resemblance, rather, “flits past [huscht vorbe], can possibly be won again, but cannot really be held fast as can other perceptions” (GS 2 206; SW 2.2 695). Similitude, in other words, is not consigned to the temporal order of irrevocable loss. Nor is it readily captured by the logic of preservation, which would work to retain the insight in a static, mausoleal existence. Elusive, un-arrestable, perhaps even resistant to reification, these nonsensuous similarities establish ties, seen only fleetingly, between what is said and meant, what is meant and written, and what is written and spoken. It is not only onomatopoeiac utterances that flutter in resemblance. In order to catch a partial glimpse of the broader archive of correspondences to which they belong, one perhaps need only look to one of the countless entries in the OED whose etymology wends its way back to an “imitative origin.” The word, “rebuff,” to take one example, derives from the Italian bufferr, meaning “a gust,” “a puff”: the swelling of the chest, the exasperated breath that leaves what’s left behind in a cloud of refusal.  

What I find most compelling here is the possibility that Benjamin’s notion of material solidarity might offer a more capacious form of togetherness than is envisioned by the Marxist conception of Gemeinwesen. If the latter insists that individuality is never truly individual and has been recognized, more expansively, as being social in character, and further, if, according to Marx, “the human being is the true Gemeinwesen of man,” Benjamin goes further and releases the communal from the horizon of species-determination. He does not deny community to those with an unspoken existence—an existence that is not uniformly audible. Such a material community, which, since it harbors not even the slightest principle of exclusion and, may be thought to run the risk of transforming into the everything that is nothing determinate at all, hardly entails a flat ontology. Benjamin insists, rather, that languages and the beings to which they correspond are differentially related, like “media with varying densities” (GS 2 150; SW 1 70). In the Arcades, we have some intimation of how a material community ann communication might be translated into a literary practice. His translator, Rolf Tiedemann, writes that the passages, “extracted from their original context like collectibles, were eventually set up to communicate among themselves.”

Drawing together what may seem like incompatible positions, Benjamin’s “Über Sprache überhaupt” represents at once a decentering of the human as the sole proprietor of language and a retention of a theoretical-theological commitment to its distinctiveness. In a departure from the biblical source-text, Benjamin associates the Fall and the degradation of naming with a “turning away [Abkehr] from that contemplation [Anschauen] of things in which their language passes into man” (GS 2 154; SW 1 72). This alienation, if not renunciation, of the inhuman world bears a visual dimension: a turning away—a gesture that insists on non-relation—that is achieved by moving such that one no longer has the other in view, or in the range of consideration. The post-lapsarian condition is one in which humans have ceased to behold or give regard to the extra-human, and in

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19"Rebuff, n.,” OED Online (Oxford University Press; June 2006).
20 Marx, Selected Writings, 45.
21 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, x.
turn, does not permit them to return the gaze. The power of the name is damaged by this estrangement; and the name becomes, as in the bourgeois conception, a sign that has a merely accidental relation to the object named.

It is important to remember that this theory of language resists, at every turn, a monolingual horizon. Benjamin certainly holds in great esteem human name-languages, which are purportedly higher than those “mute” languages that issue from inorganic matter and from creaturely life. But he does not drive polyphony toward a homogenized, elite idiom. Human language, in other words hardly remains sealed shut in a purified realm of exceptionalism. There are three aspects of this claim I would like to draw forth. First, the “law of language,” Benjamin insists, entails that “to express oneself and to address everything else amounts to the same thing” (GS2 142; SW’65). According to this radically anti-solipsistic account, communication—mitteilung, a “sharing with”—admits of no predetermined constriction of an audience or an addressee—no specification and regulation of with whom or what one’s expression is imparted. The potentially universal omnidirectionality of one’s address is by no means synonymous with transparency. Incommunicability inheres in every being that communicates.

Secondly, language is a medium of resemblance, a space of mimesis in which one’s likeness with the object-world is not repressed, but allowed to manifest. The “compulsion to becomes similar” must not be confused with something like the “coerced mimeticism” that Rey Chow has argued forces the marginalized to resemble stereotypes of ethnic difference.22 Benjamin, rather, develops a notion of a mimesis without identitarianism. Categories of identity are not, then, predetermined before a mimetic encounter, such that anything that does not reach the horizon of preordained sameness is, as in the myth of Procrustes, vulnerable to injury. On the contrary, mimesis, for Benjamin, is a mutual participation, quite apart from any legally enforced notion of consent, that draws involved parties out of their entrenchment in identity.

Benjamin speculates, in his 1916 essay, that there may be a kinship between song and the language of birds (GS2 156; SW’73). In language, it is not only the marriage of two minds and all that gets lost between them that can be signified; nor is language’s use identified with the symptom of a structure constructed by convention, which binds and also enables human agency. Rather, language is a medium of encounter, in which objects are brought into relation, in “their most transient and delicate substances, even in their aromas” (GS2 210; SW’2.2.698). A sensuous connection with what is other can be forged, if not restored, in communication, which itself participates in the formation of a commons that is not coterminous with species-being.

The third aspect speaks to the trajectory of this dissertation that explores the political implications of receptivity. The closure of the field of language that may be associated with the closure of the subject is, in Benjamin’s account, never realizable because of the possibility of translation. As we know from his “Task of the Translator,” when translated into another language, the original does not arrive, does not land there in any final way. Translation, which, in his view, must refrain from communicating any subject matter, does not involve a transit of source to destination, but partakes in a “continua of transformations” that express the relation of languages to one another (GS2 150; SW’70). Even while human languages may be in some sense elevated, they owe their existence to what it is they translate without assimilating, to what springs forth, quite apart from any (human) volition.

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Contrary to the classificatory nomenclature that serves as a means of subjection—a bringing of matter under the arbitrary and imposed sign that disavows what is heterogeneous to it—Benjamin describes an alternative kind of naming that would take place together with contemplation. The name, in this sense, is not an imposition nor a purely spontaneous act of creation. Rather, he insists, in a contrast that will recall our earlier analysis of Kant, that naming is partly “receptive” [empfangend] (GS2 150; SW1 69). Agency is not situated wholly on the side of the namer; rather, the act of naming requires the communication of “the muteness of things (animals) toward the word-language of man, which receives them in name” (GS2 150; SW1 70). What is translated into human speech must step forth, must impart itself. Despite being a singular capability of humans, naming (i.e. verbal communication) depends first on being able to take in what is shared out—and not merely on the ability to invent a linguistic order that can be inflicted, as pure convention and accident, from without. The role of receptivity in Benjamin’s linguistic philosophy is double: it is the constitutive and necessary other side of naming as invention, and it is the enabling condition of translation, which must “let itself go” [sich geben lassen] (GS4 18; SW1 260).

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To conclude, a few observations may be offered to that allow us to step outside of the current of Benjamin’s linguistic philosophy, so as to view it within a broader context. It may be worth repeating a qualification mentioned earlier—namely that, the significance of Benjamin’s early efforts does not necessarily lie in the their ability to supply pantheism, animism, or various vitalisms with a linguistic theory. His commodious sense of language—according to which, it is not quite metaphorical to suggest that a lamp addresses itself to us—is joined to a vision, whose political import is not to be underestimated or confused with a dilute sense of multiculturalism, of a genuinely polylinguistic form of communal being. Though sometimes difficult to hold onto theoretically, this absolute capaciousness is not meant to level all existents into an evenness of belonging, or even to annihilate the peculiarities of human activity. More modestly, all that is suggested—in an intimation that is at once meager and momentous—is that “concepts retain their meaning, and possibly their foremost significance if they are not from the outset used exclusively with reference to man” (GS1 410; SW1 254). What is gestured toward is not the death of the human or its extinction, or even the pretension of its absence (as in certain forms of realism). What we re-discover, here, is the possibility of keeping open, steadfastly, the question that an anthropic closure may foreclose from the start: in a generalized form of a querying of instrumental logic, one may ask whether what is thought must always and already be for the human.

In this light, the problematic of the prison-house of language can be seen to be inscribed within, if not generated by, a standpoint from which language is counted as a product of human convention and is thought to have an accidental relation to its object. The felt insularity of language, in other words, registers a previous constriction of language as restrictively human language—to the extent that, “language” as a signifier is believed, without a second thought, to designate what is proper to human enterprise; and conversely, all that is not human, is deemed extra-linguistic. Only if credence is granted to the putatively “bourgeois” conception of language does language appear welded into the predicament of interiority, manifesting as a site of subjective incarceration rather than, say, as a medium of similitude in which what is disparate can come into relation without being assimilated or coerced into identity. One may ask in which direction the force of determination travels: does the mythos [truth of the sign as accidental precede anthropocentrism—understood both as an orientation and as a socially objective condition of experience? Or does the situation of language
within the exclusive province of human convention reflect a prior circumscription whose authority is secured and maintained by capitalist modernity?

Of the many implications his linguistic philosophy has for aesthetics, I will underscore the following: language, even before it is used as a vehicle of comparison, is already partaking in resemblance. Any metaphor will always evince a second-order similarity, which channels a longer history of resemblances that have been transmitted through a process of translation, which opens human speech, or rather leaves it open, to other realms of material expression. In lyric, the image of the similar is already a redoubled similarity whose origin does not belong to the image made, but rather always contains the germ of *intentio*’s expropriation. Anthropomorphism, on these grounds, could be reconceptualized, less as a device to be wielded by the productive energies of the poet, than as a reverberation of a mimesis that exceeds human volition. In the infinitude of translation courses the hope that something of the mimetic capacity might be recovered, made robust, not least as an alternative to domination. When such resemblance breaks through to sound, it disrupts those modern regimes perceptibility that are founded on the ontological seclusion of the human race.

In short: All human speech is creole. A pidgin formed in relation to the inaudible languages issuing from the object-world, whose enforced muteness, in some sudden and atmospheric flash, sounds, shaken hale, smoketree, hummed to—lights itself into hearing.
Empathy with the Commodity

Fetish discourse always posits this double consciousness of absorbed credulity and degraded or distanced incredulity. The site of this latter disillusioned judgment by its very nature seems to represent a power of the ultimate degradation and, by implication, of the radical creation of value. Because of this it holds an illusory attractive power of its own: that of seeming to be that Archimedian point of man at last “more open and cured of his obsessions,” the impossible home of a man without fetishes.

— William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish I”

[T]he flâneur accommodates himself to the commodity; he imitates it utterly; and since there is no economic demand, and therefore no market price, for him, he makes himself thoroughly at home in the world of saleable objects.

— Letter from Benjamin to Adorno, 23 February 1939

Benjamin titled the third, unwritten section of The Arcades Project, “Die Ware als poetischer Gegenstand” [“The Commodity as Poetic Object”].

What relation is expressed by “as” in this instance? Should it be read as a simile that draws thought toward the vault of comparison? Or does the conjunction do the work of a copula and posit a yet-to-be recognized identity between the products of lyric and those of the economy? Does the labor of the poet involve taking up the wares of industry, transforming them by dislodging them from their original context and incorporating them into the aesthetic? Does the commodity pose as poetic material, or does poetry front as a thing to be exchanged? If, as Marx suggests, the commodity must be thought on the order of form and is not solely identifiable with a specific substance, might there be a set of formal determinations, modes of appearance, that are shared by the commodity and poetic object alike?

So far, we have made an inquiry into Benjamin’s life-long interest in modes of indistinction with the object-world, particularly as they are bound to moments of self-forgetting and constitute a vital part of language, whose production, if one could even call it that, always involves a reception rather than solely a designation of what is named. Continuing the investigation of how indistinguishability from the nonhuman makes its appearance in Benjamin’s writings, this chapter draws into focus an

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2 Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, The Complete Correspondence, 310.
historically bounded aspect of this larger phenomena—one that is woven tightly into the conceptual fabric of historical materialism.

In what follows, we will examine Benjamin’s unorthodox engagement with the theory of commodity fetishism. That is, we will reflect on the apparent animacy of the world of things, not as an ontological given but as a phenomenological distortion that is generated by capitalism’s de-contextualization of commodities from the scene of their production. Displaced into a temporally and spatially discontinuous setting—put on display, for instance, in the arcades, the shopping mall, the SEARS downtown—commodities seem to be endowed with a curious vitality, which, in Marx’s view, is associated with the spectral reemergence of their lost context. We will identify, in Benjamin’s thought, an insistence that the animacy of things must not be interpreted restrictively as the residue of alienated human praxis. On the contrary, he maintains that an impalpable element within the object-world remains resolutely heteronomous to the productive activity of human labor.

The far-ranging consequences of this conviction are numerous and have yet to be unfolded. To mention but one set of implications: in light of this insight, a materialist politics of mourning that, through the work of historical remembrance, links the products of capitalist development to the life that has been extinguished in them could be expanded beyond the parameters of human existence. It would become possible, in other words, to grieve for that which does not accede to humanity (and, thus, to a wage), and, as my second chapter suggests, to cultivate new forms of literary elegy in which the natural world is not simply a device for enlarging the scope and pathos of human loss. Among other things, such a reconfiguration might afford the space to take seriously Adorno’s allegation, in *Minima Moralia*, that Marx begrudges animals the surplus value that they generate as workers.³

The endeavor of this chapter is to lay bare the promise contained germinally within Benjamin’s not-quite notion [Begriff] of “empathy with the inorganic” [Einfühlung in das Anorganische]. The latter, I am suggesting, is one of Benjamin’s most fruitful attempts to break through the anthroponarcissism that afflicts Marx’s analysis of the phantasmagoria generated by capitalist production. Although Benjamin was unable to bring this idea to its full realization during his lifetime, the work he left behind on the *Arcades* and in his letters indicate that, in his view, it constituted the vital nerve of a range of socio-economic phenomena, including the gambler’s peculiar relationship with the money-form; speculation on the Stock Exchange; and the rise of the modern urban industry of sex work.

“Empathy with the inorganic,” I argue, has three decisive consequences for historical materialism. First, it crystallizes a broader effort to make space, within the analysis of capital, for the emergence of a standpoint of the commodity, which is largely denied by Marx. The relation between this chapter and the previous one—that is, between Benjamin’s earlier views on extra-human language and this later attempt to recuperate the animacy of the commodified—is not directly causal; nor is the latter project simply the secularization of a theologically inflected linguistic theory. One might say, more accurately, that his effort to discharge the ideological bounds that circumscribe meaningful communication to those already recognized as human resembles, rather than determines, his endeavor to correct, within the Marxist tradition, a potentially myopic concern with human labor as a determining force of the material world.

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Second, I will suggest that Benjamin’s consideration of “empathy with the inorganic” does not signal an abandonment of orthodox Marxism so much as a questioning of its anthropocentric basis. Benjamin’s philosophy of translation and language—developed largely in his youth—were integral to his demurrer from a Eurocentric paradigm of human exceptionalism, as it persisted in Western Marxisms of the twentieth century. His effort to push back against the primacy of the human within historical materialism is bound to a querying of the limits of hermeneutic projects of demystification. Benjamin refuses to treat literary forms of animation as a mere scandal to the truth of material reality. He re-theorizes commodity fetishism as a problem of allegoresis, and in doing so, offers a vocabulary with which to address the violence of signification that capitalism inflicts on the world of things qua commodities.

Third, and though a separate study will be necessary to treat this aspect in full, Benjamin pushes beyond a conception of the commodity as a bearer [Träger] of human value—that is, as a repository for externalized labor-power that remains discrete, if not alien to the laborer. Benjamin is fascinated, rather, by the peculiar adhesion between the subject and thing under late capitalism. The gambler, for instance, does not so much valorize matter by working on it, so much as he feels at one with the inanimate sums of money that he bets and hopes will perform well on the roulette table or on the trading floor. The coincidence between seller and object (to be sold) is epitomized, in Benjamin’s view, by the prostitute. While Marx is inclined to view sex work as “only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the laborer,” who must auction off his or her own labor-power in order to subsist, Benjamin’s willingness to examine such minor practices on their own terms raises the question of whether such economic activities in fact signal an alteration to the very notion of production in the classical sense of the term. He gravitates toward quasi-economic activities that do not necessarily involve the formal alteration of given material: collecting; roving through the districts of the metropolis in search of a buyer or patron; standing in the street with a sandwich board around the neck. In doing so, he anticipates what would only become legible to most economists in the latter part of the twentieth century—namely, the new significance of labor as it is actualized in embodied performance and that of markets that are peripheral to the formalized economy of industrial production. The factory, which remained for Marx and Lukács the privileged site for theorizing the labor-process as well as aesthetic production, gives way, in the Arcades, to scenes of the street in which commodities are cruised and material bodies are put on display.

These three elements outlined above converge with the literary, and indeed, in some sense can only be explicited within the literary, as this project could not be fully realized through the work of conceptual understanding alone. What I am drawing out from Benjamin’s thought departs, one might note, from what are widely regarded as the two most prominent contributions of the Frankfurt School to the study of lyric, both of which come to us largely through the work of Adorno: first, the imperative to acknowledge rather than repress both the un-tenability and utter necessity of the aesthetic amidst the violence of modernity—a position distilled in Adorno’s remark about the barbarity of writing poetry after Auschwitz; and second, a claim presented most concisely in “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” that even the deepest forms of lyric withdrawal cannot but be an expression of antagonisms that are fundamentally social and are often only registered in negative form. Thus, the artwork, for Adorno, has the character of a puzzle.

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In a word, I argue that the phenomenon of linguistic animation proves decisive for Benjamin’s reworking of the phantasmagoria of the commodity. Benjamin forges a materialist practice of remaining with, rather than suppressing moments of linguistic eruption issuing from things. In doing so, he refuses to refuse the animacy of the object-world as a subjective delusion—that is, as a mere (lyrical) projection, for which the human is ultimately responsible. This departure from a critical program of demystification asserts itself within the province typically reserved for the lyric—most ardently, one might add, in those ontologically uncertain spaces that ordinarily fall under the headings of personification, prosopopoeia, and anthropomorphism. Resolutely, Benjamin insists that these forms of expression cannot be taken as mere devices. As we have already begun to see, Benjamin often proceeds by setting to light what may look like personification and anthropomorphism, so that they can be seen as something other than a reflective surface, or a projection of the human that returns as a false image of an other who is not really there. Although anthropomorphism is conditioned by the stability of an ontological division that separates human characteristics from all else, it also contains an image of the potential sublation of anthropic distinctness. The stakes of such a hermeneutic experiment are, then, none other than the prospect of a materialism in which sociality would not be exhausted by human intentio—that is, by a straining, a directing or stretching of the mind toward what it seeks.

I. Variations of Einfühlung

*As I was looking at an extraordinarily beautiful Cézanne, it suddenly occurred to me that it is even linguistically fallacious to speak of “empathy.” It seemed to me that to the extent that one grasps a painting, one does not in any way enter into its space; rather, the space thrills itself forward…. It opens up to us in corners and angles in which we believe we can localize crucial experiences of the past.*

— Benjamin, “Moscow Diary”

How does “empathy with the inorganic” fall upon the ear? Perhaps one may ask if there is some kind of catechresis lurking here—some strain against the grain of proper use. Perhaps, too, there is something opaque about whether phrase names something figural or if it constitutes a figure in itself. Empathy with the neighbor, with a stranger, with an enemy, with a friend, with her, with you—this, we admit. But what of an affective communion with, say, a wool coat, a bag of rice, a toothed comb, a dilapidated mobile telephone, a kaleidoscope, a discounted porcelain vase? The provocation of the phrase is to propose a jarring identification—one that jolts identification outside of the context of intersubjectivity.

Like all of the most significant words in Benjamin’s lexicon, “empathy” [*Einfühlung*] enjoys a large degree of semantic fluctuation across Benjamin’s writings. A neologism of the German philosopher Robert Vischer, *Einfühlung*, in its original use designates an often unconscious response to seemingly “lifeless” aesthetic forms in which, by a feat of self-projection, the viewer is “mysteriously transplanted and transformed” into the object looked upon. Although Benjamin’s idiosyncratic inflection of the term strays far from the post-romantic context of empirical psychology, two aspects

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of aesthetic empathy carry through in his redeployment of Einfühlung as a quasi-economic term. First, unlike the popular meaning of the English “empathy,” Einfühlung was not exclusively intersubjective, but could pertained to a perceiver’s relation to the inanimate and natural world. Vischer’s interest in the trope of the resurrected corpse resonates with Benjamin’s fascination with the commingling of the animate and the utterly reified. Secondly, it may be worthwhile to recall that Vischer’s term is derived from the verb sich einfühlen—meaning literally, to feel one’s way into. Even in its nominalized form, it retains a sense of dynamism, perhaps even a sense of self-motion, which is less audible in empathy, understood as an even state of feeling. Thus, one might hear in Benjamin’s phrase “Einfühlung in die Ware”—if not the patter of footsteps, then a form of transit and travel that dislocates the subject from its prior relation to the bounds separating interiority and exteriority.

Perhaps the usage of Benjamin’s that is easiest to lay hold of is the most flatly pejorative one. It appears whenever he looks unfavorably on a historicist position whose first narrative inclination is “always to reinsert the object into the continuum, which it would create anew through empathy” (AP [N10a, 1]). Like Civil War recreations, faithful in every meticulous detail, such reconstructions of the past offer a way to enter imaginatively into the space of a distant epoch, to “feel one’s way into” a bygone era—moving in one direction, shuttling backward across the continuum of homogenous time, while reproducing the structure of its linearity. The technic of transport is empathy, which, in this context, he finds good reason to abolish. In his seventh thesis on the concept of history, Benjamin indicts historicism more pointedly for “empathizing with the victors” (GS1 696; SW4 391). In the context of his critique of nineteenth-century historiographic practices, empathy is antithetical to the history of the oppressed: for only the tales of the triumphant are told; and they are told in such a way as to cultivate a disposition of acedia—a generalized sadness for the plight of the conquerors—which continues to benefit the living inheritors of past exploits. Empathy, which he associates with scientific positivism, projects the past into the present with a “false aliveness” that eradicates “every vestige of history’s role as remembrance [Eingedenken]” and eliminates “every echo of ‘lament’” (SW4 401).

In a contrast that resembles Benjamin’s distinction between the viewer entering Cézanne’s picture plane and certain corners of that pictorial space leaping out, phosphorescent with the past, Benjamin’s own materialist historiography would not “fasten” onto historical objects but would rather “spring” them loose from the order of succession. If historicism produces a “context,” quotation provides the occasion for context’s interruption.

There is, however, another reticulum in which “empathy” emanates a different set of meanings, and contains, as I will argue, the promise of reconfiguring materialist history, so that social experience could be theorized from below, as it were. The form of empathy that Benjamin condemns cannot, in good conscience, be simply jettisoned as a bad object from which empathy in toto can be dissociated. Without wishing artificially to seal empathy off from the pernicious appropriations to which, as history has shown, it has already fallen prey, we can nonetheless consider its more radical dimensions, as they appear in the context of “empathy with the inorganic.”

The phrase in question appears in Benjamin’s writing intermittently, sometimes after a period of glacial quiet, only to resurface anew with a rather striking emendation. Which is to say that “empathy with the inorganic” is not a kernel, sealed onto itself in a conceptual unity. Rather, his reader must listen for how it resonates through a series of permutations. In the file he left behind under the rubric of “Fashion,” one reads about a form of “fetishism that succumbs to the sex appeal of the
consciousness. Distinction once exclusively seeks empathy. Limitless frustration to geometry inorganic” (AP [B9, 1]). Elsewhere, the phrase is recast in a more explicitly economic terms, to read “empathy with the commodity.” This formulation transforms yet again in a 1938 letter written to Adorno, when Benjamin speculates that “empathy with the commodity” may be fundamentally the same as “empathy with exchange value itself.”

Unquestionably, these variations belong within a shared constellation of thought. But its precise geometry remains tenebrous, as many of the notes he left behind on the matter were provisional. Unlike his account of “aura,” for which he supplies a different and sometimes countervailing definitions of the same term across his essays, where empathy with the inorganic is concerned, one meets the additional difficulty of confronting a term that comports itself as a shapeshifter—difficult to stabilize even at level of the signifier. The sequence of transformations of the object of empathy, from “the inorganic,” to the “commodity” to “exchange-value” present nominally slight, but consequential alterations, which can hardly be taken as perfect synonyms, nor dismissed as mere terminological inconsistency. It seems that this term—whose characteristic feature is that it cannot stop becoming something else—enacts the very phenomenon of exchangeability that it also prompts us to consider as a salient problematic of capitalist modernity, which is quite catholic in its subsumption of things under the logic of substitutability.

In introducing fungibility at a metadiscursive level, Benjamin makes the phenomenon available to the critic, not only as an object of investigation, but also as one of experience: the felt exhilaration or frustration of a vocabulary that keeps transforming, slipping away, until at last it becomes none other than exchange value. The latter, we may remember, is itself an abstraction for a quality of limitless mutability, a name for worth that can only express itself through what it can potentially become. This exchangeability is redoubled by the first part of the phrase, “empathy,” which though it may not go so far as to effect a clean trade between two positions or stations, may be said to exert a destabilizing force on identity and its situatedness. At this early point, I wish merely to note that empathy with the inorganic, which is entrained with empathy with the commodity and empathy with exchange-value, do not constitute a unitary concept that subsumes (as Kant would say) empirical or discursive objects in order to yield understanding. What gets underway in Benjamin’s writing can perhaps be better engaged as a theoretical gesture that permits itself a mimetic relation to what it seeks to know and participates in the phenomenon of study rather than holding it at a distance, so as to produce it as an object of knowledge.

II. From Within the Fetish

Like a slant rhyme that guides the ear to attune itself with what is just off-kilter from perfect sonic coincidence, “empathy with the commodity” strikes a note of felicitous dissonance with the “fetishism of the commodity,” as formulated by Marx. When I suggest that Benjamin makes available to historical materialism a viewpoint of the commodity, I am not speaking primarily or exclusively about an ocular line of sight. Rather, in keeping with the Hegelian sense adopted by the Marxist tradition, “standpoint” refers here to a relatively stable, but ultimately transient frame—at once epistemological and affective—that may be directly at odds with another vantage, but nonetheless, constitutes an essential part of a particular moment’s truth. From one side, the distinction between absolute- and relative surplus value may seem illusory; from another, the difference makes all the difference. A standpoint, moreover, is not strictly identifiable with human consciousness and the variability of its experience. Rather, a standpoint has an extra-subjective, if

7 CC 295. See also The Arcades, [m17a, 2].

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not structural element that sometimes rises to the order of a literary type—or at other times works provisionally to delimit the scope of analysis. Marx indicates, for instance, when his analysis is to be understood from the standpoint of simple circulation or that of manufacture. And when he explains how the cleft between theory and praxis appears differently to the (archetypal) capitalist and the (archetypal) laborer, he sketches experiential positions—including a rationality, a set of motives—that qualitatively exceed, as one finds in sociological studies, a mere aggregation of individuals into a general tendency.

Marx invites the reader to inhabit a relatively robust set of perspectives from which capitalism can be experienced, and further, works to delineate the phenomenological limitations inherent in each. But within this patchwork of partial opacities—none of which alone contains the truth of the situation but when brought together yield a fuller image of what no single subject can see—he generally suppresses any standpoint of the commodity. Such a vantage—situated in the experiential knowledge of what it is to be the object to be sold, or the thing that is worked on in order to be presented as a commodity—is no less fictive than the positing of a standpoint of the capitalist or the laborer.

Although some might object that to write a viewpoint of the thing is to engage in mere anthropomorphism, one might instead consider first to what extent such a rhetorical device—conventionally defined as the attribution of human characteristics to animals, to natural phenomena, or to the inanimate—is even intelligible in a context in which the distinction between self-consciousness and the inhuman realm cannot be stabilized. If, following Marx, following Hegel, accomplished labor is what produces the human qua human, it also can be said to generate the possibility of lyric anthropomorphism, which can only become operative as a figure once an ontological ossification has set in—in other words, only when, as de Man suggests, “man” is able to be furtively accepted as given. It is precisely the givenness of the human that wavers in the face of Benjamin’s self-forgetting. This wavering, it turn, sends reverberations through the tropological field of language, in which the indistinction of the human becomes perceptible.

Though they harbor deep affinities, Benjamin’s intervention should be distinguished from Adorno’s effort to give primacy to the object by funneling philosophical thought toward the subject who has the mettle to overcome its own domination. Far less attached to the promise of a subject who is strong enough to liquidate any claim of its cognitive exertions to having the final word, Benjamin’s thought keeps company with the the social existence of those on the periphery of human subjectivity. He attends to the discursive blankness of thinghood until, gradually, it ceases to appear as the terra nullius on which the exploits of dominating consciousness will be inscribed as history. Such attentiveness is practiced with the hope that the non-subjective—or that which does not take the form of the self-reflexive structure of consciousness—might be extricated from its instrumental use in the process of self-differentiation and subsequently un-welded from its equation with the abject: “You are no more than a thing.” This adjustment entails neither an elevation of things to the purportedly intrinsic dignity of the human nor an affirmation of the sanctity of sheer existence, the preservation of life carte blanche. (“The proposition that existence stands higher than a just existence is false and ignominious,” he writes in “Critique of Violence.” (G 201; SW 251.) If one were to locate Benjamin’s thought within the Hegelian topos, one might say that that he mourns and politicizes the silence of the thing that mediates the relation between lord and bondsman; he endeavors, further, to remain receptive to its expression, even if that expression interrupts the self-

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actualization of consciousness that comes to recognizes itself in what is external. Benjamin remains open, like Hegel, to the radical potential of de-subjectivation—of unlearning and becoming unbound from the bodily and psychic arrangements that have previously allowed one to emerge as a subject; but unlike Hegel, Benjamin sets loose such decreative moments from a progressive trajectory of cultivation.

Following, momentarily, a Marxist translation of the Hegelian thing into the commodity, the slave into the wage laborer, one might see Benjamin’s empathy with the commodity as an effort to break open the potential that lies within things and, thus, to reconfigure the scenario of sociality so that alienated existence might be overcome by other means than by reproducing—between the human and the object-world—the structure of domination that, for the Hegelian bondsman suspended between life and death, preserved tenuously under the yoke of another, was already scarcely survivable. As Benjamin believes is possible, one can participate in a resemblance with a thing, rather than standing over it and bringing it under the sign of one’s own identity. Mimesis travels an alternative, and sometimes more itinerant path than that of the struggle for individuation, in the course of which the subject transforms the wealth of externality into a store of resources of the self. “Empathy with the inorganic” names a becoming that is antithetical to the accumulation of things as aspects of one’s identity, one’s trajectory of self-fashioning.

Benjamin’s gesture of opening up, or rather listening for, the commodity’s standpoint might readily be viewed in terms of a politics of inclusion—that is, as an attempt to integrate the marginal into an existing structure of perceptibility. Stabilizing the experience of the commodity into a fixed position, a place of standing, is not, however, the ultimate object of Benjamin’s thought. What he makes it possible to consider, rather, is the experience of having no standpoint—a condition that refers both to those existents that are systematically omitted from an analytic framework and, more abstractly, to that which cannot be resolved into a stable point of orientation on which epistemological certainty can be grounded. When I suggest, then, that Benjamin gives thought over to the emergence of a nonhuman standpoint that would otherwise have remained foreclosed by orthodox materialism, one should note that the mimetic drift between human and thing that Benjamin follows so attentively does not always resolve into a stance but in a sense threatens the integrity of the very notion of a “standpoint”—as something that indicates differentiation and distinctness.

Keeping in mind the frailty and mutability of the “standpoint” in question, I would like to draw into focus three dimensions of Benjamin’s thought, which, I argue, have the potential to open historical materialism to a nonhuman perspective that is not reducible to an illusory state of anthropic projection. First, within Marxist thought, attending to the dehiscence between commodity and thing, which though ontically difficult to separate are theoretically distinct, allows for a resistant capacity of the thing to come into view—that is, a force of unwillingness not anchored in the self-possessed individual nor in legally recognized structures of selfhood. Second, this chapter reconstitutes the notion of aura so that it is not so narrowly inscribed within the problematic of modernity and its crisis of authenticity. While established readings emplot aura in a narrative of decline, in which the authority of aesthetic objects, once made reproducible, lose their ability to be in a singular place and time, aura also names a “carrying over” or “transference” [Übertragung] to the inanimate world of a responsiveness that is typical among human relations. Third, I examine Benjamin’s disinclination from the theory of reification, as part of an an effort to effect a critical reorientation—one that is in keeping with his longstanding interest in mimesis—such that the fetish character of the commodity would not primarily be viewed from the Archimedean point of a disenchanted world, but would be countenanced, as it were, while under its spell. In the last of these
three shines most explicitly Benjamin’s effort to wrest critical thought from the elevated position of subjective rationality. This vital aspect of his work—illumination without enlightenment—remains still one of the most promising links to anti-colonial and anti-racist traditions of thought.

III. If Commodities Could Speak...

In capsule form, Marx’s aim in the opening chapters of *Kapital* is to guide us toward the recognition of the commodity-form as a distortion that takes a chiasmatic shape: “the personification of things and the thingification of persons [Personifizierung der Sachen und Versachlichung der Personen].” The target of Marx’s critique is the overinflated, mystical powers attributed to the world of commodities, which seem autonomously to rise and fall in price—and bizarrely to have a sociality of their own. The chiasmos is to be uncrossed. People must seize the powers of animation that they themselves have breathed into the world of things; and the spectacle of dancing, self-moving objects must be sobered into a recognition of the irrationalism of such a sensational appearance. Marx enacts this very restitution by entertaining this striking hypothetical:

If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse [Unser eigner Verkehr] as commodities proves it. We relate to each other [Wir bezeichn uns] merely as exchange-values. (K 110; C 176-77)

By the power vested in the conditional form, he permits the commodity’s voice to become audible—but only within the frame of implicit impossibility. The sequence of his argument proceeds as follows: he ventriloquizes the object and forces its to speak an untruth, which he ultimately exposes as false. As Fred Moten writes of the speaking commodity, whose historical basis, he argues, is the resistant slave: “In its inability to say, it must be made to say.”

In the remainder of this chapter, Marx goes on to reveal the commodity’s statement as misguided, and we quickly learn that the impropriety of its speech has a double character. First, what the commodity says is deceptive, since it wrongfully naturalizes exchange-value as an intrinsic quality when such value is entirely bestowed by the social relations of human labor. Second and more fundamentally, speech is not proper to the thing, does not belong to it, since it can possess nothing but the condition of being possessed. The situation Marx has fantasized, in other words, binds epistemic claims to the claims of speech, such that to disclose truth entails the silencing of the object; and, conversely, the garrulousness of the object entails falsity. Writing, still, under the sign of science, Marx insists that the commodity that he momentarily lets speak must be made mute. The dancing table that he conjures as a figure of the general enchantment of the thing-world under capitalism must be stilled into an inert literalism. This act of demystification derives its rhetorical force from a double repress of theological and the primitive—that is, a denial of the fetishism

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11 “...the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to being dancing of its own free will” (C 164).
associated with the unidentified but presumably foreign, “misty regions of the religious world” (K 103).

Marx draws the episode and section to a close by throwing the voice yet again, so that the stupidity of the commodity is recast as the prevailing view held by those contemporary political theorists, who remain oblivious to the social character of exchange-value. “Now listen to how those commodities speak through the mouth of the economist,” Marx instructs his reader, staging the very reversal that he condemns, through which things take rule over human beings, who, instead of asserting themselves over the material world, are converted into a mere prop, mouthpiece, puppet. If commodities could speak, Marx suggests, they would not content themselves with self-expression but would go further and take bodily possession over persons, whose own capacity for speech would be commandeered. In a reversal that recalls the inverse of Benjamin’s scene of epistemic possession, no longer do the economists speak about commodities; they are, rather, spoken by them. When Marx, at the end of the chapter, schools the economists—“so far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond”—he effectively puts the speaking commodity back in its place (K 111; C 177).

I wish here to emphasize two things. First, animacy, interestingly, seems indissociable from sociality. Marx plays with the semantic possibilities of Verkehr, which, as Derrida points out, can refer to both to material exchange and linguistic intercourse. 12 Second, his critique of the illusory sociality of the thing-world, which is joined to the reclamation of human praxis, involves the hermeneutic work of militating against figuration. One must be able, like a competent literary critic, to recognize and dissipate the image of enlivened objects as little more than anthropic projection. Further, one must, in order to understand the truth of capital, be able to identify the device that produces such a distortion and provide an account of its operation.

IV. Between Commodity and Thing

Commodities cannot go to market and make exchanges in their own right. We must, therefore, have recourse to their guardians, who are also their owners. Commodities are things, and therefore without power of resistance [widerstandlos] against man. If they are not willing, he can use force [Gewalt]; in other words, he can take possession of them. In order that these objects may enter into relation with each other as commodities, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another, as persons whose will resides in those objects, and must behave in such a way that each does not appropriate the commodity of the other, and part with his own, except by means of an act done by mutual consent. They must therefore, mutually recognise in each other the rights of private proprietors. This juridical relation, which thus expresses itself in a contract, whether such contract be part of a developed legal system or not, is a relation between two wills, and is but the reflex of the real economic relation between the two.

— Marx, Das Kapital, Volume I (K 113-114) 13

In Marx’s view, things and commodities are not synonymous. Rather, being a commodity is a contingent form that a thing can take when it is impressed upon, stamped [stempeln], or affixed [befestigt] with abstract, homogenized value. A commodity is a “mysterious” thing that has been marked—an imprint that is not intrinsic, but imposed from without and made to adhere so closely that, like a metal coin etched with a face or a brand flamed onto flesh, it would seem difficult to remove without compromising what underlies it (K 103; C 164). If the aim of the first part of Das Kapital is to guide us toward the recognition of the commodity-form as a distortion, coming to this truth involves adopting a discriminating disposition toward appearances. The optic Marx tutors us into is a penetrating one, which compels false semblances to give themselves up.

So many commentaries on Marx’s critique concentrate on the distinction between use- and exchange-value as the key to dissolving the illusion that commodities can “step forth” independently of the human activities that went into making them. The commodity is bifurcated, with its cut concealed: it is an object of utility but also something produced in order to be exchanged. Only when the latter predominates does the fetish descend: the mesmerizing appearance of a nearly mystical sociality among goods, who appear to conduct independent and tumultuous lives, with their prices soaring and falling by a set of natural laws that remain largely opaque to most individuals and become, for the speculator, the object of passionate curiosity.

But what more can be said of the difference between commodity and thing—a difference that is not, I would argue, in perfect alignment with that between exchange and use? Things, in contradistinction to commodities, are implied to pre-date and be capable of surviving capitalism. The commodity is a predication of the thing, one of the many potentialities that a thing can but not does not necessarily have to be—a quality or form not written into the thing’s substantive being but nonetheless a possible expression of it. Marx speaks often of Dinge als Waren: things as commodities, dressed up, comporting themselves, looking like, coerced into being commodities. Perhaps there is a utopian kernel housed within the thing, which is what a commodity would be were its forehead not stamped with the universalized character of value that makes abstract equivalence out of sensuous differences. Though, perhaps not.

One is not born a commodity, but becomes one. This is the realization that this section’s epigraph unfolds. This scene is situated at the opening of Marx’s second chapter, on “Exchange,” and it follows directly after he disperses the commodity fetish into its rational substrate. The apparent animacy of commodities, we have learned, is merely the effect of a de-contextualization: human, social relations have been cast into the shadows, where they have become opaque to each other—even unseeable. In Marx’s critical diagnosis of a problematic reversal—“[t]heir own movement within society [gesellschaftliche Bewegung] has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them”—an agenda for (intellectual) emancipation is established, though in negative form, in the promise of rectifying the inversion and turning the world (and Hegelian idealism) right side up (K 105; C 168). Humanity must retrieve the broken connection between its life force and the artifacts it brings into being. Precisely because “the characters who appear on the economic stage are but the personifications of the economic relations that exist between them,” part of this reclamation involves the hermeneutic work of dispelling figural speech (K 114; C 179). The table that, as a commodity, stands on its head will be taken hold

14 In the third chapter of The Melancholy Science, Gillian Rose explains how Adorno’s account of reification does not stress so much the process of labor, as in alienation; reification is not a subjective state or a socio-psychological condition but hinges, rather, on the distinction between use- and exchange-value.
of, disciplined, bolted to the ground; the system of mirrors will be taken down; and the hunchback dwarf who has all this while lived underneath its wooden roof will be exposed to the sobering light of reason.\footnote{See the first thesis of Benjamin's “On the Concept of History.”}

The moment narrated in this section’s epigraph is the first picture we are given of a disenchanted world, stripped by the force of reason of all “theological niceties” (K 102; C 163). Following a rhetorically playful section, the reality principle now hits hard. In this sequel to the commodity fetish, which many commentators stop short of, the appearance of the commodity seems so drastically altered that were the signifier not there to guarantee some continuity in reference, the “commodity” might not even be recognizable. At the chapter’s start, commodities are removed from their elevated place as a collective protagonist, captivating, self-moving—nimble—endowed with super-human capacities, a robust social life, and an objectivity whose truth lies beyond most of us. Now, they appear stilled—as powerlessness congealed.

Notice how the initial supposition of the object’s dependence, the commodity’s lack of autonomy, its inability to walk somewhere by itself (can you give me a ride?), is the motor of necessity that drives the scene to become populated—one might add, rather quickly. In the short space of a half paragraph, the scale of Marx’s optic magnifies, moving swiftly from things to their guardians to a system of ownership rights, and finally, to a civil society of proprietors, held together by a social contract. We have arrived, in other words, at Western Europe of the nineteenth century. Marx understands the entire juridical apparatus not to be a manifestation of justice but a reflex of the economic, whose necessity begins with the primary dependence that has been installed in the body of the disenchanted commodity.

On the previous page of Capital, we played witness to the commodity’s improper speech. The hypothetical enunciation has now been sobered into the brutal truth of its impossibility; the inversion, it seems, has now been set straight: commodities are under the rule of men, instead of ruling them. Commodities are shut out from the realm of language and self-motion. They are soberly reimagined as being incapable of any self-reflexive activity: they cannot exchange themselves \[\text{sich autstanschen}\] and sorely lack self-consciousness about their own historical condition.

The force of necessity, radiating from the commodity’s incapacity, is strong and strange: commodities cannot go to the market all on their own; so, Marx continues, we \textit{must} go looking \[\text{sich umsehen}\] for their guardians \[\text{Hütern}\]. Something unmentioned appears to be dictating the inexorable progression of this sequence. There are many ways one can get to the market, if one is not already there. In this scenario, it seems that in order to travel to the site of exchange it is not primarily material conditions that are required—a horse, an automobile, wifi—but more fundamentally, a non-egalitarian form of sociality. Dependence is met with the notion of requisite protection, of custody. The figure of the guardian is introduced, evoking a familial structure in which the commodity would play the part of the stubborn child or the errant animal. In an appositional phrase, this class of keepers, protectors, and shepherds is re-identified as group of proprietors \[\text{Warenbesitzern}\]. To be a guardian is to own, to possess.

The next pair of short sentences continues to lay out an order of necessity that houses a stunning contradiction. First, a definitional claim: commodities are things and \textit{therefore} \[\text{daher}\] without resistance against men. Straightaway a conditional statement follows: if they are not willing, he, the
owner, can use force or violence. Note that it is not by virtue of being a commodity but by being a thing that makes one powerless to resist—a powerlessness that is not absolute but defined in relation to people, and not, say, to the elements, the decaying effects of time, or a destructive potential native to the material world. The “thing” names that which is without the ability to withstand the human; it comes into emergence in a field of opposition, in the context of a furtive antagonism. We learn that men can take things *qua* commodities into possession. And to do so, violence can be exercised and may even be legitimated.

The mystery left obscure by these two insights is how the commodity can be wholly without the capacity to resist and, at the very same time, characterized as unwilling. In other words, the second sentence, which appears to follow rhetorically from the first, contravenes it. How are we to traverse that unaccounted-for drift from incapable to not willing, from being without resistance to being obdurate to the point of warranting force?

Marx, here, offers no perspective of the commodity, which, in his previous chapter was opened, only to be reprimanded and closed. We have no explicit knowledge of why commodities would be disinclined to go to the market, or why they might act in concert to manifest their reluctance to capitalist processes of exchange. We only know that their refusal to cooperate constitutes a real possibility for which he feels he must account. In this portrayal, things are attributed with a generalized helplessness and a generalized intransigence. The objects of exchange embody a force of resistance that is denied conceptually (at the level of definition) but practically acknowledged (you’ll have drag them, if they don’t walk). One may be inclined to cast this potential for resistance as an ontological condition related to materiality’s inherent recalcitrance. But there is, over and above the unchanging impassivity of things in the face of a potentially furious human effort to alter them, something that rises to the higher threshold of unwillingness. To be *unwillig* is to be loathe to do something, even indignant; and true to its etymological origin, it entails the possibility of “wishing” otherwise, i.e. the germ of a political vision, formed by a “not-this,” whose potency lies dormant but can burst out of a determinate negation.

There are two additional aspects of this paragraph I would like to make prominent. First, the notion of “personhood” is derived from thinghood, and not, as one might expect, the other way around. The existence of things *qua* commodities gives rise to and determines human sociality: the way people emerge as “persons” who relate to one another as proprietors; the structure of consent guaranteed by the contract; even the notion of (legal) “representation” stems from the prior supposition of what a thing is and what it cannot do. When people relate to each other, they do so, “merely as representatives” of commodities. In a less murderous Hobbesianism, Marx’s theory of exchange presumes that, without a social compact, people will not necessarily strike one another dead, but will certainly try to seize each other’s belongings. “Personhood” is merely the antidote that guarantees object constancy, the maintenance of a steady and predictable relationship to the thing, in which the will forcibly shelters itself, even when the shelter is itself unwilling and perhaps even capable of revolting against being taken over as a place of living. To possess [*besitzen*], we see here, is to stage a potentially uninvited occupation (of a thing).

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16 This sequence, then, remixes the Hegelian account, in which mutual recognition emerges out the confrontation between two agonistic parties, who are each prepared to die and kill the other on account of its disturbingly similarity. In the *Phenomenology*, the first mention of the Thing, “the object of no value” that is affiliated, in his lectures on history, with the slave, occurs after the life-and-death struggle between two self-conscious parties. In Marx’s scene, by contrast, the contest of wills is first mediated by the thing, which is the source, if not cause, of interpersonal conflict.
Second, this portrait of the thing as powerless yet conditionally unwilling is prior to and even to the side of objectification, where *verdinglichung*—the “making into a thing”—is understood to mark the perversion of activity into passivity, which, in Marx’s thinking, are properly aligned with human subjects and inhuman objects, respectively. This question of the thing’s foundational definition, as the material incarnation of a force of resistant resistance-lessness, remains wholly untouched by critiques of reification. Such a theory consolidates the abstract processes of capital, so that they can be crystallized and apprehended in the form of a corrupted chiasmus: human, living labor is ossified into things outside of them, and things, in turn, throw off their stony inanimacy to become actors of their own volition. A corrective hermeneutic can seek restitution, by reconstructing—as one would the severed strings of a marionette—the connection that draws things back to the actions of a human hand. Or, a politics of remembrance might look redemptively upon the “trace of a forgotten human element in the thing” (Adorno’s phrase), as a way to stave off the disappearance of lost labor and life into the shadow of oblivion (GC 322). What, in both cases, remains un-thought is the fixedness of the points of reference that orient this transformation. Although one can glean from Marx’s humanist writings how the process of subject formation unfolds or is stunted under capitalism, there is no comparable account of thinghood itself, no analytic narrative of the pre-history of reification, or, put otherwise, how, seemingly prior to the becoming-thing of the human, the two-fold character of the thing as unwilling and being unable to resist men is already in well in place. Or, if not accurately temporalized as chronologically anterior to the rise of capitalist production, one might ask how the supposition of things—which are distinct from commodities—as not-quite-passive but mostly so, underlies or determines the operations of capital—not as a punctual cause—but as a continuously effective substrate, available for distortion.

The point is significant enough to bear repeating. The simple and general form of capitalism entails, in Marx’s words, “the personification of things and the reification of persons”: two movements, which cross each other in a taut x, which, in turn, comes to signify the untruth that capitalism visits on subjects and objects together (K 136). The critique of reification allows us to chart this transit, but it does not permit us to understand how the stations of departure and arrival are inaugurated and remain operative—how they are established as structural coordinates that comprise the backdrop against which we measure the warping of reality that capital engenders. How, in other words, can the positions of person and thing remain intact and stable points of reference that uphold our recognition of a double crossing between thing and person, as if they were grand, stately terminals, indisputably essential to a city, but with the peculiar feature that nobody ever seems to venture inside them?

It is not always easy to distinguish when Marx’s writing should be read as descriptive rather than analytic, or vice versa. Quite possibly, his characterization of things as violable but resistant may not represent his own suppositions; perhaps he is merely making explicit the presuppositions of a society that is already primarily organized in accordance with a system of private property. But insofar as capital can be identified with the story of commodity production, the thing, if not situated as historically prior to the commodity, must at least be understood to be irreducible to it. This precarious margin of irreducibility is precisely what Benjamin holds fast to, all while making explicit the under-theorized nexus of violence in which the thing finds itself, seemingly from the first.
V. An Inhuman Element in Things

At this point, one could certainly bring the ontological categories of person and thing to a quivering point, until, in the riot of supplementarity, their distinctness collapses. But a different path may be followed, which begins by noting how Benjamin’s thought proves resistant to orthodox Marxism in the following two respects. The first can be apprehended by comparing Marx’s own chiasmatic formula with the figure of the Medusan glance that Adorno calls upon in order to characterize Benjamin’s philosophy. Benjamin, Adorno writes, “is driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects—as in allegory—but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as being ancient, ‘ur-historical’ and abruptly release their significance” (P 233). His method, in sum, involves a fossilization of the living and an animation of ossified remnants—a double metamorphosis that, because of its differently diachronic dimension, does not conform exactly to Marx’s chiasmus, but nonetheless can be said to resemble more than repudiate it. Mimesis, once again, seems to be at work. This affinity, or to reprise the definition of the mimetic capacity cited earlier, this “powerful compulsion to become similar,” is perhaps what leads Adorno to suggest, in a damning or at least ambivalent remark, that “Benjamin’s thought…swears loyalty to reification” (G.S2, 210; P 233).

From the thirties onward, Adorno and Lukács expand the critique of reification by exposing the force it exerts within the field of cultural production. The question of commodification—how it is accomplished, its scope, its effect on subjectivity and on the products of spirit—lies at the heart of Adorno and Lukács’s debates about whether modernist literature merely exacerbates the solipsism that is symptomatic of bourgeois ideology, or contains, through its refusal to depict the world as it is, unprecedented political potential. With an insistence that ran counter to both of these thinkers, but also in a sense, against the sensibilities of Brecht, who had renounced theatrical empathy in favor of the alienation-effect, Benjamin endeavors to think beyond the diagnosis of reification. He does so, first and foremost, by declining the theoretical aim of re-consolidating the power of animation into the hands of human praxis. If I may restate somewhat differently the axial tension I would like to draw into focus: during an historical moment when his fellow intellectuals on the left are intent on demystifying the appearance of an inspired world of things, Benjamin writes a line like this:

An inferno rages in the soul of the commodity, for all the seeming tranquility lent by the price. (P [J80, 2; J80a,1])

Benjamin invokes Marx’s sardonic conceit about the soul of commodities, does not squelch it but rather returns it to us inflamed. The sentence’s second half makes a claim that is familiar to historical materialism, namely that price acts as the instrument and sign of equivalence, which makes all commodities equitable to all others—thus, generating a phantasmagoria of sameness. Price is the radical indifference to difference that produces the sheen of an unperturbed state of universal identity. In the usual account, such a realization is only possible when the commodity is de-animated, made stolid and unmoving as bone. Benjamin, on the contrary, endeavors to make this point, not by militating against figuration, but by bringing it to the point of combustion. Here, the commodity is fired up and capable, if not of rage itself, then something like hellish pandemonium, a clamoring, abyssal whatthefuck, running raving riot in the soul of the reified. “This is not anthropomorphism,” to reprise a line from Benjamin’s 1916 essay (G.S2, 143; SWT 64).

It is true that Benjamin does not follow suit with the Marxist program of applying rational consciousness to disabuse experience of the illusion that the world of things is self-powering,
operating quite independently of human praxis. Instead of banishing personification, he stays intently with the “figural,” and in whatever way possible, cultivates its potential to effloresce into a literality that scandalizes any anthropic claim to hold a monopoly over the production of (semantic) value. Nature is not, then, only present in the modality of “the given,” which awaits investment by the work of man. As in the scene of epistemic dispossession discussed in the previous chapter, this heteronomous element cannot be exacted from the object by force of will.

What makes Benjamin’s materialism distinctive, I am suggesting, is the way his embrace of literary enchantment is joined to an attentiveness to the distinction between thing and commodity, which is present in Marx’s thought but often treated as theoretically minor, especially when compared to the more prominent contrast between use- and exchange-value. The previous section drew to the fore the uncertain character of the thing, which, in Capital, appears as the demystified substrate of the commodity that is subject to coercion whenever they exhibit non-compliance with those that take possession of them. Although Benjamin orients the eye toward the small, but radical spark that arises from the dehiscence between thing and commodity, he does not, as we saw with Marx, conceptualize the animacy of things primarily as a force of resistance that is modeled on a humanized, defiant will. As we will see, the ontological designation of thinghood and its implication in a nexus of violence is a concern that sustains Benjamin’s notion of allegory, from his early study of the Trauerspiel through to his later engagements with Baudelaire’s poetics of urban disconsolation. But first, one may ask: If not as a locus of voluntas—a concentrated, inner resource of determination—then what form does the animacy that is extrinsic to the structure of personhood take?

In a letter written in 1940, Adorno insists that “all reification is forgetting”—more specifically, a forgetting of a constitutive moment of human labor that, under the capitalist organization of work and life, is made to expire into oblivion (CC 321).17 Adorno suggests further that Benjamin’s rather diffuse phenomenon of aura is derived from this forgotten trace of the human, which remains lodged in the world of things. In response, Benjamin decidedly refuses the explanatory identification of aura and reification, in order to insist on the existence of something heteronomous to human praxis:

But even if the question of the aura does in fact involve a “forgotten human moment,” this is still not necessarily the moment of human labour. The tree and the shrub which offer themselves to us are not made by human hands. There must therefore be something human in the things [ein Menschliches an den Dingen] themselves, something that is not originated by human labor. But I do not wish to go any further here. 18

Benjamin’s reticent rebuttal entails the insufficiency of the theory of reification developed by Lukács, as well as of the Marxist notion of an emancipatory inversion, whereby the things that rule over people as an alien force are properly repositioned as the products and objects of human activity. No project of demystification, understood as the cognitive consolidation of the powers of animation that have been dispersed across the object-world, could eradicate what is alien to human sociality—namely, an inhuman gaze that meets us, sometimes in the form of an auratic presence.

17 This sentence also appears in Adorno’s sketches for The Dialectic of Enlightenment (191).
To look at a thing and to see only an un-remembered trace of the human hand would leave a politics of remembrance incomplete; for doing so engenders a forgetting in the name of recollection of “the humane element in things” that has not been endowed by labor. Benjamin’s wayward materialism compels Marxism to confront what is heteronomous to human praxis. The latter cannot be uncovered by following production chains, working backward from consumption to distribution to manufacture and ultimately to the raw materials that are extracted or put to use. Marx does briefly recognize “air, virgin soil, natural meadows, etc.” as use-values that “are not mediated through labor” (C 131). But these are located anterior to anthropic cultivation and production, and are regarded as initially extrinsic to the capitalist system of exchange-value, even though later they can be wholly subsumed. What Benjamin insists upon, against but within an environment that is incontrovertibly built and made, is a point of unassimilability to the totalizing logic of capitalism, which post-Marxist critique would so fervently insist on exposing. In the archive, Benjamin saw before his very eyes how, with Haussmanization, an entire city could be remade overnight and with the humblest of instruments, like the pickaxe.

And yet, faced with a world that was being built to image on an unprecedented scale—an age in which human “planning” was newly equipped and determined to overcome any material resistance to it—Benjamin still looked for elements whose being there was not by grace of anything that humans had done. This search did not, however, rise into a quest for the sacred. Rather, he went on to look in the most improbable of places: the telephone receiver; the grainy photograph reproduced a thousand times over. It is as if, looking to the past he could see proleptically that the reified world would not be set free by a critical program of de-fetishization. Not only was the latter too much a reflux of the phenomenon it was trying to counter but, much in the way that a drawing of an object and a drawing of the negative space around an object theoretically should yield an identical shape, but in practice often result in an inexplicable discrepancy, a world demystified would still bear a residual laceration. The hand that would lift the veil was the very same that held itself over the mouth of anything not acceding to humanity.

If not, then, as a raw material, or as an input for human industry that is initially extrinsic to the economy, but capable of being subsumed to it, how does the “human-ness in the thing” make its appearance? For Benjamin, the unlabored would not principally be brought into view by retreating to the ecological reserve, to fantasies of the frontier—in short, not by seeking unalloyed sites of nature. It is true that he often draws from a distinctively romantic image-repertoire, which includes scenes of meditative encounter with the landscape. “What is aura actually?” Benjamin asks, in his “Little History of Photography” (GS 2 378; SW 2 518). He supplies the following reply to his own question: “to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance” (GS 2 378; SW 2 518). A gaze whose remittance returns as shadow: what is seen from afar does not remain so, but draws nearer to the body, upon which it falls without touching—and the whole of this is drawn through by polar filaments of time.

While the intimate encounter with the scenic environs offers a point of access, a way to make the somewhat opaque experience of aura relatable, Benjamin’s thinking is more energized when turned toward the task of making sense of how aura traffics in the everyday milieu of industrial society, in which consumption becomes paramount, perhaps even most so for those who cannot afford it.

Here my argument follows in the spirit of Miriam Hansen’s effort to create more breathing room for the heterogeneity to which the notion of aura speaks. Quite helpfully, she breaks open the canonical
reading of aura as a narrowly aesthetic category, referring to a special quality intrinsic to traditional crafts: a hard to place but indelible glow of authenticity and autonomy (there it stands, on its own, real, singular, radiant with the past). With the rise of technological reproducibility, the story goes, aura meets its own irrevocable decline, even though glimpses of it can be caught here and there, particularly in markets that spring up in order to fabricate and sell simulated aura on a mass scale. (One finds the predecessor of Instagram in those photographers of the 1880s, who started to retouch images so as to create dark spots that were characteristic of photos taken by an earlier generation of cameras with slower lenses.) Aura, in short, is cast as the protagonist in a tale of what modernity makes disappear, and so elicits utmost ambivalence—oscillating as it does between being an aureole of beautiful inaccessibility whose demise compels mourning, and an enemy of the avant-garde, needing urgently to be obliterated.

Running contrapuntally to this masterplot of the withering of experience is an untimely inhuman element, which disrupts the ordinary course of human society, along with the continuitist temporality presumed by the production process. I would like to give more depth to this less familiar aspect of aura—that is, aura understood not so much as the idealized or loathed je ne sais quoi of art prior to its reproducibility, but rather as the experience of something un-endowed by human labor, which persists in the fabricated material world and is liable to being forgotten. Far from counteracting this forgetting, the critique of reification is complicit in bringing it about. This, I suspect, may be one reason why it has remained minoritized by more canonical readings of Benjamin’s engagement with mass culture. In her brief mention of this extra-anthropic source of the auratic glow, Hansen describes the phenomenon as a fleeting return of the archaic, which comes to us in the form of a reflexive mode of perception through which our gaze is unexpectedly reciprocated—sometimes coming back from the deep past. She emphasizes that this gaze that somehow finds its way back to us causes the subject to confront “a fundamental strangeness within and of the self.19 The auratic experience corresponds to an episode of mémoire involontaire, a felt temporal disjunction in which “a visionary encounter with an other older self” flickers fleetingly into view.20

My own inclination is to ask, somewhat differently, whether “aura” might not be a semantic placeholder for a more radical encounter with what is heteronomous, not only to the perceptual subject, but to the anthropic one, broadly conceived. Marking a departure from the well-known problematic of the “shocklike confrontation with an alien self,” which has variants in the psychoanalytic encounter with the foreignness of one’s own specular image or in the internalized aesthetic disruption that is the sublime—the experience of aura draws the subject outward to that which does not already lie, unrecognized, within the human.21

Hansen’s investment in cinema’s ability to potenti ate a collective subject understandably draws her reflections on aura toward the motif of stunning and disconcerting self-estrangement, as it is technologically mediated in unprecedented ways. She recalls how Benjamin took interest in the fact that in the early days of cinema, people could not recognize their own gait when it was played back to them on film; neither could they recognize their voice as it echoed back to them on a phonograph. If we look elsewhere than the “Work of Art” essay, we find something other than a visionary encounter with a structure of self-reflexivity that, in its prolonged course, has been become preternatural and uncanny. In “Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin imagines, in contrast to

20 Ibid., 348.
21 Ibid., 350.
poet’s description of eyes that have lost the ability to look, that the experience of aura is most replete when it involves an attentive act of looking, which permits an inhuman gaze to meet it in return:

Was an der Daguerreotypie als das Unmenschliche, man könnte sagen Tödliche mußte empfunden werden, war das (übrigens anhaltende) Hereinblicken in den Apparat, da doch der Apparat das Bild des Menschen aufnimmt, ohne ihm dessen Blick zurückzugeben. Denn Blick wohnt aber die Erwartung inne, von dem erwidert zu werden, dem er sich schenkt. Wo diese Erwartung erwidert wird (die ebensowohl, im Denken, an einen intentionalen Blick der Aufmerksamkeit sich heften kann wie an einen Blick im schlichten Wortsinn), da fällt ihm die Erfahrung der Aura in ihrer Fülle zu. »Die Wahrnehmbarkeit,« so urteilt Novalis, ist »eine Aufmerksamkeit.« Die Wahrnehmbarkeit, von welcher er derart spricht, ist keine andere als die der Aura.« Die Erfahrung der Aura beruht also auf der Übertragung einer in der menschlichen Gesellschaft geläufigen Reaktionsform auf das Verhältnis des Unbelebten oder der Natur zum Menschen. Der Angesehene oder angesehen sich Glaubende schlägt den Blick auf. Die Aura einer Erscheinung erfahren, heißt, sie mit dem Vermögen belehen, den Blick aufzuchlagen. 22

[What was inevitably felt to be inhuman—one might even say deadly—in daguerrotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze. Inherent in the gaze, however, is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met (which, in the case of thought processes, can apply equally to an intentional gaze of awareness and to a glance pure and simple), there is an experience of the aura in all its fullness. “Perceptibility,” as Novalis puts it, “is an attentiveness.” The perceptibility he has in mind is none other than that of aura. Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object is to invest it with the ability to look back.]

*(SW 4* 187-188)

In the course of explicating the aura as a term, he draws upon a linguistic archaism—beleben—that performs the temporal incongruity about which he speaks. Belehnung, which most translators render as a “lending” or “investing,” evokes a transaction that does not necessarily entail the strict equivalence of a monetary loan. Intimating a feudal scenario, Benjamin figures aura as a gesture comparable to conferring a title or relinquishing property—an act of ceding a parcel of land in exchange for allegiance. The activation of a reciprocal gaze, which constitutes auratic experience, is not, then, simply a feat of projection. It is not that some aspect of the self is cast outward, repudiated, and attributed falsely as being “outside.” Rather, what he describes is a mode of perception that involves relinquishing a holding, a giving over of something that, in being conferred, takes on a different, and relatively independent form. Whatever is given may never come back to the lender as a consolidated power or property. Again, Benjamin identifies an experiential plenitude in a phenomenon that resembles what a disenchanting optic would regard as a bankrupted illusion: the transmission [Übertragung] of a reaction-form [Reaktionsform]—a mode of responsivity and

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attentiveness that is ordinarily common to human society—onto the relationship between the human world and what he variously refers to as nature or the inanimate world of things. A critique of reification would regard this phenomenon as a perversion liable to lead to fetishism or as a category error that would be a suitable target of pedagogical reform. Benjamin’s language suggests that this “investment” of the inhuman world with the faculty to cast up one’s eyes could be understood less as a projection of anthropic traits than as a dispossession of human society of its proprietary and exclusive hold on the ability to have a view, a perspective.

His disjunctive phrase—nature or the inanimate—distinguishes his thought from vitalist philosophies, which elevate the living. And like so much of Benjamin’s thought, this whole phenomenon of auratic experience is characterized by an ambivalence that does not permit intention to gather in any single place: certainly, a hierarchy is presumed by the structure of conferral—an index of the inequality that, by his moment of modernity, had become a socially objective condition. Nonetheless, the notions of transmission, contagion, and capacity (which very well may not be exercised), flicker between intentional act and the wholly involuntary.

Benjamin’s parenthetical remark is worth emphasizing—especially since so much scholarship about the gaze has emerged out the context of film studies and under the influence of a Lacanian theory of visuality, in which the eye is a privileged organ whose potential loss is associated with the threat of castration. For this reason, the gaze tends to be interpreted as a predominantly anthropic, optical phenomenon, to be located within the material histories of imaging technologies—the camera obscura, the panopticon, the zootrope, the television, the flip-book that prefigures the film reel—and the broader scopic regimes to which they correspond and help to constitute. Contra the theoretical presumption, effective from Sartre and Lacan through Mulvey and Crary, that the dynamics of the gaze must primarily be situated in the visual field (i.e., the glance through the peephole or the camera lens), Benjamin leaves open the possibility that auratic experiences of looking-as-lending-the-capacity-to-look-back might not take place within the purview of an optical encounter, strictly speaking. Much as we saw in the scene of epistemic dispossession, the reciprocated gaze can be shaken into life, not only through the eye but in thought, through a mode of perception that is identified with attentiveness [*Aufmerksamkeit*].

The remainder of this chapter’s argument will pursue a trajectory complementary to, though often overshadowed by, the techno-psychovisual emphasis in the reception of Benjamin’s work. In the way that Benjamin’s notion of the “dialectical image” is admitted a literary presentation, the vision arising from the inhuman world can, as we see in Benjamin’s footnote to the passage above, make its way back to us through the medium of language:

> Diese Belehnung ist ein Quellpunkt der Poesie. Wo der Mensch, das Tier oder ein Unbeseeltes, vom Dichter so belehnt, seinen Blick aufschlägt, zieht es diesen in die Ferne; der Blick der dergestalt erweckten Nature träumt und zieht den Dichtenden seinem Träumen nach. Worte können auch ihre Aura haben. (GS 1 647)

> [This conferred power is a wellspring of poetry. Whenever a human being, an animal, or an inanimate object thus endowed by the poet lifts up its eyes, it draws him into the distance. The gaze of nature, when thus awakened, dreams and pulls the poet after its dream. Words, too, can have an aura of their own. This is how Karl Kraus]

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described it: “the closer one looks at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back.” [SW4 354]

Much as Benjamin says of Kafka’s prose, that they “are not parables and yet they do not want to be taken at their face value,” Benjamin’s seeks after that intermediary zone between allegory and facticity: not a medial point but a dynamic state of suspension in which language is blown toward two opposing directions to the effect that motionless, it is neither transported toward a transcendent horizon of meaning (the ostensibly higher plane of allegorical truth to which the concrete and manifest corresponds) nor is it made to bottom out into an empirical referentiality, a designation of what exists within the plane of pure immanence (SW2.2 803).

Like Kafka, Benjamin seeks to recuperate the powers of literality that are waiting to burst open from textual practices ordinarily marked as figural, while also lifting the ban on an interpretive act of taking figures at their word—a mode of reading that post-Enlightenment thought can admit, but only insofar as one accepts the caveat that to do so is naive or poetic. The earnestness with which he considers Marx’s improbable conditional—that a commodity might have a soul—indicates an adjustment more abiding and less contained than the volitional suspension of disbelief. Nor is Benjamin advocating, as in certain contemporary reactions against symptomatic reading, any wholesale methodology founded on a reorientation away from latent content toward what is manifest, perceptible, “neither hiding nor hidden.”

Many versions of the contemporary suspicion directed toward the suspicious hermeneutics of Marxism and psychoanalysis proceed by way of a non-dialectical reversal of the relative emphasis placed on depth over surface. In such cases, the refusal of excavatory strategies of interpretation is attended by a valorization of empirical modes of truth-production and an investment in the “neutrality of description” as a mode of writing capable of producing “undistorted” and “complete” accounts of the phenomena of study, while minimizing the critic’s exercise of the faculty of judgment.

It is true that Benjamin shares with proponents of “surface reading” an interest in the limits of demystification; in literalness as something other than a throughway to a deeper, privileged meaning; and in modes of textual engagement that are not founded on the critic’s heroic feat of producing truth by forcibly extracting it from the subterranean stratum of what a cultural artifact does not say out loud. But the reactionary eschewing of the non-manifest and the implicit expansionary drive toward what is considered transparent and available to “just reading” (to whom, one must ask), could not be farther from Benjamin’s thought, in which communication and incommunicability are always acting as each other’s envelopes, so that every word becomes a harkara in possession an undeliverable message, as the communication is the breathless transmission itself.

The political stakes of Benjamin’s literary and hermeneutic engagements are not limited to disclosing the physiognomy of a distinctly modern subjectivity, which is formed at once defensively, by parrying the shocks of the grand metropolis and creatively, by undertaking the work of self-

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25 Ibid., 18.
26 Ibid., 12.
fashioning that becomes indistinguishable from life. 27 Neither is his insight into historical materialism restricted to his study of commodification and to the broadening of the field of aesthetics to include media of mass culture. In addition to these better recognized contributions, Benjamin shows that, far-reaching as the commodity-form may be, reification and its critique cannot be taken as total in scope.

His philosophy does not pledge loyalty to reification so much as it declines a critical method premised on flexing one’s subjective strength in order to perform a refusal of the world of (false) appearances. He bends his thought to the materials that have already succumbed to the phantasmagoria, to insist that even the most fabricated thing exceeds the sphere of human, productive labor. In so doing, he makes it possible, not necessarily to dispense with the analytic of the fetish, but to provincialize it, temporally and geographically. The commodity, in other words, is never present to itself in time: it is afflicted by or rather offers shelter to an untimely presence of not only past labor but to what is extrinsic to that history of production. Finally, I am suggesting that the relevance of Benjamin’s linguistic investigations pertains not only to the well-studied commodity fetish, but also to a critique and salvage of the thing, which underlies and shoulders the commodity, not unlike a vehicle does its tenor. The “thing,” in this context, is by no means to be understood in the Heideggerian sense of the word, as being elevated over the lesser category of the “object”—and idealized as “a gathering” of the fourfold of the sky, earth, the divinities, and mortals. Under late capital the thing is, more profanely, the prior and continuously constitutive element of the commodity, which can be reduced neither to an inert material substrate nor to a self-possessed agent of its own fate. The thing is made the porter of its own seal of condemnation, the commodity-form, whose marks Benjamin seeks not to deny but to read differently. The thing is the non-person against which force can be legitimately exercised in the name of possession. And the commodity is the parasitic form of homogenization that obfuscates the sensuous particularities of things, petrifies, and cuts off social ties to them. In the midst of all this deadening, Benjamin draws his ear closer to things, until they awaken into language.

VI. Things Objectified

The dynamism of goods—the shudder, their disturbance of the peace of abstract equivalence—expresses what cannot be realized in propositional form. The larger cause to which this vision belongs presses materialist thought to recognize the theoretical distinction between thing and commodity, even though in actuality capitalism seeks everywhere to solder them together, as if they had sprung from the soil that way. This separation of terms, which started to come into view in the second section of this chapter, is but an initial step in Benjamin’s larger effort to re-imagine of the problem of the phantasmagoria from the omitted standpoint of the commodity, who has no doubt seen better days. When a table first makes it debut as something to be exchanged within capitalist society, this moment does not only spell the fateful metamorphosis whereby, as Marx insists, inert matter is suddenly “endowed a with life of [its] own” while, conversely, living human relations are petrified into material [dinglich] ones (K 101; C 165). For Benjamin, the ascendance of the

27 “[G]enuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things, as people imagine” (336)—the bold universality of this remark strikes me as evidence of a connection between aura and his 1916 iteration of his philosophy of language, in which he writes, “The existence of language, however, is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression in which language is always in one sense or another inherent, but with absolutely everything.”
commodity-form entails, too, the violation of things, which he makes newly legible as a problem of inscription and allegoresis:

La clé de la forme allégorique chez Baudelaire est solidaire de la signification spécifique que prend la marchandise du fait de son prix. A l’avilissement singulier des choses par leur signification, qui est caractéristique de l’allégorie du xvie siècle, correspond l’avilissement singulier des choses par leur prix comme marchandise. Cet avilissement que subissent les choses du fait de pouvoir être taxées comme marchandises est contrebancé chez Baudelaire par la valeur inestimable de la nouveauté. La nouveauté représente cet absolu qui n’est plus accessible à aucune interprétation ni à aucune comparaison. Elle devient l’ultime retraquement de l’art…. Le nouveau est une qualité indépendante de la valeur d’usage de la marchandise. Il est à l’origine de cette illusion dont la mode est l’infatigable pourvoyeuse. Que la dernière ligne de résistance de l'art coïncidât avec la ligne d’attaque la plus avancée de la marchandise, cela devait demeurer caché à Baudelaire.

The key to the allegorical form in Baudelaire is bound up with the specific significance which the commodity acquires by virtue of its price. The singular debasement [l’avilissement] of things through their signification, something characteristic of seventeenth-century allegory, corresponds to the singular debasement of things through their price as commodities. This degradation, to which things are subject because they can be taxed as commodities, is counterbalanced in Baudelaire by the inestimable value of novelty. La nouveauté represents that absolute which is no longer accessible to any interpretation or comparison. It becomes the ultimate entrenchment of art…. Newness is a quality independent of the use value of the commodity. It is the source of that illusion of which fashion is the tireless purveyor. The fact that art’s last line of resistance should coincide with the commodity’s most advanced line of attack—this had to remain hidden from Baudelaire. (GS V.1 71-72; AP 22)

One hears in this remark echoes of his earlier and more general lament of the human tendency toward “overnaming,” which subsumes to silence—at once grievable and itself grieving—all that the inhuman world imparts. When describing the condemned fate of things under capitalism, Benjamin makes use of a noun—avilissement—which is ordinarily reserved for persons. Its verbal root, avilir, signifies in an earlier usage a depreciation in economic value. Not unlike guilt and debt are minted together in Schuld, the “debasement” whose story Benjamin tells is articulated doubly in terms of a decline in moral and fiscal worth. As in his earlier essay on language, human signification is the means by which, not just particulars, but the entire thing-world is abased. It is less that the symbolic is conceived generally, as Lacanian psychoanalysis would have it, as an infliction or wound, but that the specific and partial idiom of price acquires the hegemonic force of a monolingual order—one that eradicates linguistic diversity, or else devalues the currency of other forms of value’s expression. Again, Benjamin’s endgame is not merely to salvage the precious object, but, proceeding in the manner of critique, his reading sets into motion a seismic disruption of the less tangible but systematic devaluation of things qua things, which in turn becomes the ground zero to which the violated human is said to fall.

Benjamin is hardly singular in re-conceptualizing the commodity-form in terms of signification. Indeed, the notion that commodities are constituted by processes of representation has become
especially salient for financial assets that do not have any physical incarnation and traffic, rather, in second-order abstractions. What makes Benjamin’s take on this problem distinctive, however, is his insistence that debasement can be undergone by things, and not by only those exceptional beings, human laborers either at work or kept in reserve, whom various forms of humanism invest with dignity.

Benjamin, in short, disarticulates thing-hood from objectification in the pejorative and most commonly employed sense of the word. This means, first, that the existence of things is not identified exclusively with the end-result of a process by which man [sic] externalizes himself in material form, nor with the devalued byproduct of a movement of self-differentiation. Things have an existence outside of circuits of subjective constitution and valuation, even though they are increasingly mediated, if not practically subsumed, by the latter.

Modern imaginaries of the West struggle to stay with this notion—namely, that objects might be disarticulated from objectification—without re-situating thing-ly existence in the realm of the noumenal or re-inscribing it as a dimension of subjective experience. Put more simply, just because a thing cannot be fully assimilated into human circuits of production—economic or otherwise—does not mean that it can then only be recuperated by use, ownership, or appreciation, or thought of as “things in themselves,” isolated in a world beyond reach.

Second, and as a direct result of the first insight, Benjamin makes it possible to ask, without the appearance of tautology, whether it is possible for an object to be objectified. Put otherwise: If something is not first recognizable as a subject or aspiring to be a subject, can one meaningfully speak of its being turned into a “mere thing” (when already, it is legible and identified as a thing)? Ordinarily, when objectification is understood as a process of dehumanization, being produced as an object marks the terminal result of an act of violence. To speak of an object’s objectification would not, in the context of Benjamin’s thought, be nonsensical. Nor would it point to a copular emptiness (i.e. the object is itself). Distinct from an ontic repetition, or a restatement of being, the objectification of an object is a process that may appear as redundant only if debasement and thinghood are left, as they are in Marx, largely conflated. Far from a vacuity of experience, this redundancy constitutes a form of violence that effaces itself as violence since it appears in the guise of a reproduction of what’s already there, i.e. as something proximate to fact, or expressed in the attitude, “I’m only making you what you already are.” What may be at issue is a violence targeted at the spectral resurgence of the object that continues to comes forth, always in excess of the “mereness” relative to the subject that will be and already has been ascribed to it. Thus, the violence enacted in the course of the object’s objectification has a double character: the object is not only debased, but that debasement is absorbed, retrospectively, into an ontological condition that is purported to precede that debasement. Violence toward the object, one might say, is fated to the repetition of an objectification that cannot quite ever be accomplished because in enacting it, it performs what has already been accomplished. This untimely subjugation is precisely what capitalism achieves through the regime of price that holds the thing-world ransom—only to be won back by paying into a system of exchange that is complicit in compromising the objects it subsumes.

VII. The Matter of Allegory

What can be said of the relationship between perspective and address? Does an act of address presuppose at least a provisionally stable (literary) perspective from which one can be said to speak?
Or, rather, does address open up the very perspectival field from which an address will always seem, retrospectively, to have been issued?

If it is true that address can be generative of a point of view, and not just something overlain onto it—as a superstructure, if you will—then one might ask what allows an address to be felicitous in giving rise to a viewpoint and what, conversely, causes an address to fall flat, or even to foreclose a standpoint from emerging. How do we account for those instances when an address strikes a target, but its reception does not occasion the appearance of a perspective that can be recognized? Or, for those dead letters in which an attempted address is taken to be unreceiveable—as noise, silence, traumatic effraction?

What Benjamin means when he posits a trans-historical correspondence between the debasement of things engendered by seventeenth-century allegory and that which occurs in capitalist modernity by dint of the ubiquity of price I will allow him to explain himself. “Once the object [Gegenstand],” he writes in The Origin of German Tragic Drama,

wird...untem Blick der Melancholie allegorisch, läßt sie das Leben von ihm abfließen, bleibt er als toter, doch in Ewigkeit gesicherter zurück, so liegt er vor dem Allegoriker, auf Gnad und Ungnad ihm überliefert. Das heißt: eine, Bedeutung, einen Sinn auszustrahlen, ist er von nun an ganz unfähig; an Bedeutung kommt ihm das zu, was der Allegoriker ihm verleiht. Er legt's in ihn hinein und langt hinunter: das ist nicht psychologisch sondern ontologisch hier der Sachverhalt. In seiner Hand wird das Ding zu etwas anderem, er redet dadurch von etwas anderem.... (GSI 359)

(has become allegorical beneath the brooding look of Melancholy, once life has flowed out of it, the object itself remains behind, dead, yet preserved for all eternity; it lies before the allegorist, given over to him utterly, for good or ill. In other words, the object itself is henceforth incapable of emanating [auszustrahlen] any meaning, any significance of its own; it can only take on that meaning which the allegorist wishes to bestow it. He instills it with his own meaning, reaches under it: and this must be understood not psychologically but in an ontological sense. In his hands the thing in question becomes something else, speaks of something else…] (O 184, translation modified)

Benjamin’s distinction between symbol and allegory is partly a temporal one: the former constitutes an instantaneous unity, whereas the latter expresses a mere wish for the reconciliation between spirit and its object, and proceeds from one moment to another in an ongoingness that resembles less the momentum of forward progression than something like the temporality of coping with the discontinuities of this world. Benjamin is careful to distinguish the metamorphosis undergone by the object handled by the allegorist from a phenomenon of psychological perception. To understand what may be at stake, it may be helpful to think about how, when a movie is projected onto a surface, no matter how dramatic the latter’s transformation into a play of light and figure and story and space and all the still tensions of dialogue ushered into sound—the thing that is being projected onto retains its constitution, quite apart from the images that are overlain onto it. This perhaps too roughly hewn comparison is meant to give some provisional sense of what Benjamin means when he insists emphatically that allegory—as a process of implanting meaning—is not a purely a subjective operation, or more merely a way of looking, say,
at a blackbird. On the contrary, the object is changed fundamentally, in its very constitution, at the level of what it is. In the arguably invasive process of allegorical production, the object becomes something else—something, as it were, radically exposed, surrendered to, and taken over by the incursion of foreign intention, which comes to exert the force of identity. Allegory—and *Verwandlung* may indeed be more apt descriptor, from perspective of the object—is extra-subjective. Divested of its meaning, and divested, too, of the capacity to mean, the object is turned into the object ready to hand. It becomes identified with its (potential) instrumentality. And though the link between allegorical and commodity production would not be made explicit until some years later in his life, one can see how reservations about using objects as a receptacle for the work of human significance would reverberate with his reluctance to accept wholly Marx’s conception of matter as a *Träger*—that which carries or bears—human labor.

This conversion of the object has a physiological dimension that becomes vivid when we call to mind the contrast between Dürer’s “Melancholia,” in which “the utensils of active life are lying around unused on the floor, as objects of contemplation” and the cornucopia of scenes in Agnes Varda’s *The Gleaners and I*, in which the audience catches a view of collectors, picking up items from the rubbish-pile, so as to determine what meaning might be assigned to them (GS1.1 319; O 140). Benjamin alters the physical coordinates of allegory: if, ordinarily, allegorizing is associated with a vector of transcendence that lifts up ordinary objects to a higher meaning, he rewrites the process as one of casting an object to the floor, where it is subject to a violating occupation. To allegorize is at once an expressive act and a debilitating one. The poet qua allegorist alchemically transforms things by infusing them with a heteronomous meaning, which, in turn, becomes all that the thing can say. As in Marx, the thing/commodity can only speak the words that have been forcibly deposited within it, can only say otherwise than what it is. As one may already be able to sense from this brief treatment, (over)signification exists on a continuum with violence, if it is not directly identified with it.

This rather early characterization of allegory—Benjamin submitted the *Trauerspiel* for review in 1925—is picked up once more in first section of his last project, which, though ultimately left unwritten, bore the title, “Baudelaire as Allegorist”:

> Die »metaphysischen Spitzfindigkeiten«, in denen sie sich nach Marx gefällt, sind vor allem die Spitzfindigkeiten der Preisgestaltung. Wie die Ware zum Preis kommt, das läßt sich nie ganz absehen, weder im Lauf ihrer Herstellung noch später wenn sie sich auf dem Markt befindet. Ganz ebenso ergeht es dem Gegenstand in seiner allegorischen Existenz. Es ist ihm nicht an der Wiege gesungen worden, zu welcher Bedeutung der Tiefsinn des Allegorikers ihn befördern wird. Hat er aber solche Bedeutung einmal erhalten, so kann sie ihm jederzeit gegen eine andere Bedeutung entzogen werden. Die Moder der Bedeutungen wechseln fast so schnell wie der Preis für die Waren wechselt. In der Tat heißt die Bedeutung der Ware: Preis; eine andere hat sie, als Ware, nicht. Darum ist der Allegoriker mit der Ware in seinem Element. Als flaneur hat er in die Warenseele sich eingefühlt; als Allegoriker erkennt er im »Preisetikette«, mit dem die Ware den Markt betritt, den Gegenstand seiner Grübelei—die Bedeutung—wieder.

[The “metaphysical subtleties” in which the commodity delights, according to Marx, are, above all, the subtleties of price formation. How the price of goods in each case
is arrived at can never quite be foreseen, neither in the course of their production nor later when they enter the market. It is exactly the same with the object in its allegorical existence. At no point is it written in the stars that the allegorist’s profundity will lead it to no one meaning rather than another. And though it once may have acquired such a meaning, this can always be withdrawn in favor of a different meaning. The modes of meaning fluctuate almost as rapidly as the price of commodities. in fact, the meaning of the commodity is its price: it has, as commodity, no other meaning. hence, the allegorist is in his element with commercial wares. As flâneur, he has empathized with the soul of the commodity; as allegorist, he recognizes in the “price tag,” with which the merchandise comes on the market, the object of his broodings—the meaning.] (P [J80,2])

When the earlier account of allegory is placed alongside this later re-contextualization, the following resolves into new clarity: if there is current in Benjamin’s materialist thought that resists the allegorical, such resistance is not summoned merely to affirm an allegedly non-symptomatic surface as the proper locus of meaning; nor is it a refusal of the Marxist hermeneutic as a paranoid one. The concern, rather, is directed toward the gap order that prohibits anything but the stipulated meaning from shining through. The fetishism of the commodity, in other words, is inflected differently under Benjamin’s glance. When a thing steps forth as an allegorical object or as merchandise, it does not suddenly appear as a spectacle of grotesque enchantment; rather it enters into a state of dumbness before the univocal significance with which it has been bestowed, to the extent that its very being, its ontological fiber, appears as equivalent with its assessment: the tea kettle is thirty-five dollars; the imported banana, sixty nine cents on the pound; the unskilled laborer, ten per hour—nothing more. Just as Orwell’s pigs point away from themselves by being almost instantaneously seen through as standing in for the Stalinist bureaucracy, commodities are made always to “speak something else,” to mouth a determination of value that originates heteronomously, like the inscriptions etched on those who are condemned in Kafka’s “Penal Colony,” by the instrument that metes out justice by inflicting injury.28

No doubt, Benjamin’s reconceptualization of market capitalism as a prodigious structure of significance, which knows no limits to the expansion of its dominion over social and natural phenomena, may strike the economist as only of marginal use. Indeed, it may look as though Benjamin were merely translating concepts of political theory into quasi-mystical aesthetic ones, while leaving their content more or less intact. From this vantage, the correspondence between commodity-form and the form of allegory may be little more than a re-statement of the classical insight that capitalism subsumes all existents under the law of abstract equivalence. But a decisive difference lies in the respective horizons toward which the engagement with the commodity qua fetish and allegory tend: viewed before Marx’s optic, the fetish is to be dispelled into a sobered vision of a world formed by the itineraries of human action whose continuity has been obscured or made inaccessible to phenomenological experience; Benjamin, by contrast, urges us to listen closely for the communication of objects, which in the lived context of modernity, which seems inescapable—and thus, warrants being referred to by Benjamin as “Hell”—is always mediated by the very stratum of convention that incapacitates things from having, as Hegel’s bondsman eventually does, a sense of their own.

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Benjamin’s re-interpretation of the commodity-form as allegory, I would argue, offers insights that go beyond the subsumption thesis mentioned above. And though he is, in a sense, rewriting the commodity form as essentially a problem of a vandalizing script, he is also attempting to theorize a discrete phenomenon whose significance would only be revealed fully much later in the century, with a more complete shift to a financial mode of production—namely, the social import of trafficking in volatility. The gambler’s drive to speculation and the allegorist as a savant of price are the predecessors of derivative traders, whose powers of intuitions an asset’s price probe as far into the future as is it profitable to go. Not only do they determine what a thing is worth; but, masters as they are of the conditional tense, their premonitions of how a thing will be valued given x condition, at y date, receive the stamp of social validity—even though there is little to distinguish them, in essence, from the astral prognostications contained in *Mnl. Apin*, the ancient Babylonian compendium of stars. For Benjamin, there may have been a kernel of redemption in the creativity involved in the formation of price and, correspondingly, in the mutability of allegorical meaning, which was not prescribed by fate, and thus, free from the order of myth, could, at any moment, be withdrawn and replaced with another. Much as he observes that Baudelaire would remain blind to the disappointing historical outcome suffered by the “new”—namely, “that art’s last line of resistance should coincide with the commodity’s most advanced line of attack”—what would remain hidden from Benjamin is that even this compromised margin of originality would be automatized ruthlessly. With the simultaneous development of mathematical models for pricing the flux of value and of computers of unprecedented processing power, which large firms program to do the work of high-frequency trading and, quite apart from human decision, execute trades faster than the blink of the human eye, contingency would be systematically hedged and captured—and withdrawn even from the experience of the individual investor (*GS* 359; O 189).

**VIII. The Weak Allegorist**

As similar as Baudelaire and the baroque allegorist may be, Benjamin notes a historical difference that makes all the difference. One may recall that, contrary to the presumed eternity of symbol, allegory is itself exposed to decay and, in Benjamin’s words, has an existence in the realm of thoughts that is comparable to that of ruins in the world of things (O 178). Allegories, in other words, can become weathered. Eminently dated, they bear within them, not only an order of significance that is subjectively infused into the materials that are made contingently available by the historical present; they also shelter, sometimes against themselves, an extra-intentional record of their transience. The latter component is partially what Benjamin gestures toward when he insists that the allegorist’s act of inducing meaning through objects cannot be interpreted in strictly psychological terms. In *Convolute J* of the *Arcades*, which is dedicated to Baudelaire, Benjamin further complicates the analogy in question:

Verhältnis von Ware und Allegorie: Der »Wert« als natürlicher Brennspiegel geschichtlichen Scheins überbietet die »Bedeutung«... Auch hatte die Ware dem Produktionsprozeß ihr Stigma—die Proletarisierung der Produzierenden—noch nicht so tief eingeprägt. Darum war die allegorische Anschauung im siebzehnten Jahrhundert stillbildend, im neunzehnten aber nicht mehr. Baudelaire ist als Allegoriker isoliert gewesen. Er suchte die Erfahrung, der Ware auf die allegorische zurückzuführen. Das mußte scheitern und dabei zeigte sich: die Rücksichtslosigkeit seines Ansatzes wurde durch die Rücksichtslosigkeit der Wirklichkeit überboten.
Daher ein Einschlag in seinem Werk, der pathologisch oder sadistisch nur darum wirkt, weil er an der Wirklichkeit vorbeitraf-doch nur ums Haar.

[Relation between commodity and and allegory: “value,” as the natural burning-glass of semblance in history, outshines “meaning”…. In the Baroque age, the fetish character of the commodity was still relatively undeveloped. And the commodity had not yet so deeply engraved its stigma—the proletarianization of the producers—on the products of production. Allegorical perception could thus constitute a style in the seventeenth century, in a way that it no longer could in the nineteenth. Baudelaire as an allegorist was entirely isolated. He sought to recall the experience of the commodity to an allegorical experience. In this, he was doomed to founder, and it became clear that the restlessness of his initiative was exceeded by the relentlessness of reality. Hence a strain in his work that feels pathological or sadistic only because it missed out on reality—though just by a hair.] (AP [J 67, 2])

The relation of correspondence transmutes into one of historical supersession. The rise of capitalism spells the triumph of (exchange-)value over meaning. It is not only that certain allegories wane from the popular imagination, but the very script of allegory writ large falls fainter before the commanding inscription of price. Baudelaire, so dramatically out of joint with his moment, appears as a “straggler,” the last of a long-extinct species of practitioners of allegory, who could invest the things at hand with a singular meaning—and do so with style (GS 690; SW 4 191).

Benjamin re-invokes tropes that in his earlier work were associated with allegorical production, including the metaphors of illumination and the psychosexual reference to signification as sadistic possession. When, however, allegory is deployed in the context of capitalist modernity, its whole tenor is changed. The allegorist, as potentate of meaning, is divested of any power to make the significance he assigns to objects visible, let alone to have any endurance. Baudelaire, like Chaplain, is always lurking in the vicinity of a heroism that can’t quite be accomplished; too easily, he is taken for the bouffon—always on the verge of becoming just another one of the big city’s casualties. Because his lyrics wear signs of struggle on their sleeve, he ceaselessly repels the glow of pastoral nostalgia that would, in Empson’s words, proceed by taking “a limited life and pretend[ing] it is the full and normal one.” Allegory, in short, takes on a qualitatively different character. It no longer can be understood solely a signification inflicted on the object world; it is, rather, a mode of signification without the ability to leave a trace—a show of power whose strength relative to the world is so vastly diminished that it becomes a “show” in the sense that many would hardly take pains to discriminate from the act of pretending.

One may wonder to what extent the refraction of this historical transition through the frame of an embattled subjectivity coping with diminished sovereignty may be threaded into masculinist anxieties

29 Speaking of allegory as a manifestation of power qua knowledge, Benjamin writes in the Trauerspiel: “The voluptuousness with which significance rules, like a stern sultan in the harem of objects, is without equal in giving expression to nature. Indeed, it is characteristic of the sadist to degrade his object and then—or thereby—to satisfy it” (184). In this orientalist vision, signification, and not, as one might expect, the allegorist, is figured as a potentate whose pleasure lies in ruling over the object-world, which is made into his gratifying, masochistic complement. The imposition of a conventional order, as it is in the language essay, is understood to be complicit with violence. As we will continue to see, the ability to conceptualize object-degradation at times seems so thoroughly implicated in feminized sexual bondage that it becomes difficult to discern which may be the precedent or general case of the other.
30 William Empson, Some Versions of the Pastoral (New York: New Directions, 1974, 115.)
about impotence. It is not pure hallucination to see, in the vision of Baudelaire, walking defensively through the metropolis, battling the elemental force of the crowd, a reluctant reincarnation of Lear raging through the heath. Indeed, at times it seems that the degree to which Baudelaire can be celebrated as a representative genius of modernity is circumscribed by the pathos or imperial nostalgia that can be felt for the persona of fallen king. Benjamin, who found Baudelaire’s perpetual shadowboxing noteworthy, not only as a mode of being in the world but also as a peculiar form of poetic labor, cites the latter’s description of Constantin Guys, who “held his pen like a rapier”: “he is combative, even when alone, and parries his own blows” (GS1 571; SW4 40). What arises from this portrait of a lived antagonism with the omnipresent, but frustratingly disincarnated forces of capitalist modernity is a theory of literary modernism as that which is written through with its own weakness in relation to the forces that jeopardize its existence. These are times in which the artist’s allegory is without the efficacy to generate reality-effects; and the poet, whose very existence is unseasonable, knows well that her word has less currency the further the market advances.

This characterization of Baudelaire continues to exert itself in the form of a strong resonance, if not influence, on contemporary accounts of modernism. Jameson is hardly alone in proposing that this aesthetic category is defined, more so than by any strictly formal feature, by the pervasive sense that the literary work can only succeed through a staging of its own failure.31 Benjamin’s sketch of Baudelaire gives the impression that the poet couldn’t write quickly enough, couldn’t outpace the market at the game of innovation, which once had the potential to elude market logics—since the “new” could not so easily be reduced to a calculus of use- or exchange-value.

Within this somewhat familiar scene of the artist ceaselessly fighting a losing battle against the forces of capital, there are two aspects that may be emphasized. The other side to the experience of felt hostility, and the arguably compensatory reconceptualization of poetic labor as act of warfare is a less antagonistic way of looking at praxis. Slightly to the side of the whole complex of shock experience, the notion that the poet is engaged in a duel may be an instantiation of that mythic paradigm, me against the world; but such an image-scene also makes available the slightly different valence of poetic writing as “a continual series of tiny improvisations”—a practice of impromptu response through which allegorical production and decipherment converge (GS1 572; SW4 41).

This version of Baudelaire, which is less invested in the virtues of vitriol per se, and more in the everyday acts that coalesce into the performance of a sensibility, is developed further in Foucault’s response to the question “What is Enlightenment?” In the course of these remarks, he provides a somewhat de-politicized account of the subject of modernity as a self-stylist, who elaborates himself—on the model of the dandy—through the cultivation of a particular “attitude” to reality, which is not so much negated as simultaneously respected and violated.32 As will shortly become apparent, my own argument seeks to draw out a mode of engagement with modernity that does not locate political fulfillment in either the valorization of heroic failure or in the “autonomous” production of the self as an aesthetic object, through an exercise of “freedom,” which can be

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31 See Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (New York: Verso, 2016). It is possible that the hidden derivation of Jameson’s epigram—History is what hurts—lies in Benjamin’s theory of Baroque allegory: “Where the symbol as it fades shows the face of Nature in the light of salvation, in allegory it is the fauces hippocratica of history that lies like a frozen landscape before the eye of the beholder. History in everything that it has of the unseasonable, painful, abortive, expresses itself in that face—nay rather in that death’s head” (GS1 343; O 166).
difficult to distinguish from the neoliberal imperative to build up one’s own resources of human capital.33

Benjamin’s reappraisal of the urban allegorist acts as a dialectical hinge for understanding how Baudelaire repurposes allegory into a technic of negative dialectics. “The allegorical mode of apprehension is always built on a devalued world of appearances”: as allegory staggers forward into the modernist moment, this defining and fundamental characteristic persists unchanged (SW4 96). It remains, unquestionably, inseparable from a practice of instrumental appropriation, but in Baudelaire’s hands, it bears “the mark of rage” (GS1 671). When allegory is turned toward objects that have already been degraded into an existence as mass-produced commodities, it generates a reversal of its own capacity for damaging the object-world by forcing onto it a meaning, which implicitly is always anthropic. The very same device used to take possession of objects becomes an aid for salvage work—for wresting things away from the diminished existence to which capital sentences them ruthlessly and efficiently, to the extent that objects are already born into a degraded state. Baudelaire, who, to reprise Benjamin’s words, “sought to recall the experience of the commodity to an allegorical experience,” would, in the course of his poetic production, unleash a destructive energy, whose blaze appears as rage, a fiercely polemical bent, a gross sensibility, pathological asociality—or else, satanism (AP [J67, 2]). Never hesitant to admit the grittiest of the vernacular into his verse, Baudelaire wrests things from their ordinary scene—as goods displayed for sale, much as the allegorical intention of older days would sabotage the organic contexts from which their materials were drawn (“Un cadavre sans tête épanche, comme un fleuve, / Sur l’oreiller désaltéré / Un sang rouge et vivant, dont la toile s’abreuve / Avec l’avidité d’un pré”).34

Insofar as allegory has the potential to offer resistance to industrial development, it does so by effecting a re-signification and decontextualization—the very operations carried out by the capitalist mode of production. Formulated more simply: Baudelaire does to capital what it does to the world. Some of the limitations of the redemptive paradigm of allegory are evinced in Baudelaire’s biographical record. Its success depends too thoroughly on the resilience of the individual. The desperate hope—often indistinguishable from survival—that poesies could outperform the market at its own game of innovation, had only a limited longevity. The allegorical intention would have to stay fast on the heels of the ever-restless dialectic of the “new.” In a framework of anti-capitalism still committed to the man-hero, such tireless work of partial negation would be sustained by a sole consciousness, a lone wolf who spent a good part of his life changing addresses, just so that he could remain elusive from his creditors, until at last, he had to give up his favorite pastime of streetwalking altogether, since his debts became unbearable. Exhaustion, as we learn from Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle, is the fate of the besieged individual.

When, in “Central Park,” Benjamin metaphorizes allegory as a modern form of armature, he offers, in the contours of this image, a glimpse of how the limitations of Baudelaire’s literary strategy will coincide with those of any mechanism of defense. “Baudelairean allegory,” in contrast to the Baroque variety, “bears traces of the rage needed to break into this world, to lay waste its harmonious structures” (GS1 671; SW4 174). This same sentence appears in The Arcades—with “violence” [Gewalttätigkeit] standing in place of “wrath” [Ingrimm] (AP [J55a, 3]; GS5, 414). And while rage and force are summoned together, across the two versions of this text, as a resource for lancing through the sheen of undisturbed civilization, Benjamin qualifies his endorsement of

33 Ibid., 42.
34 In “Central Park,” Benjamin alludes to this stanza of “Une Martyre” without citing it (GS1, 670; SW4 173).
Baudelaire’s destructiveness. The latter contains but a trace of what would be necessary for the inimical façade of the capitalist world to be pulled down.

Such a practice of poetic aggression would only be able to envision a limited horizon of transgression. Such is the imperative derived from it: instrumentalize better than the market. Many aspects of this account of allegory are recounted in some form in Buck-Morss’s chapter of The Dialectics of Seeing, “Historical Nature: Ruin.” A degree of repetition has been permitted here, in part to make more explicit the ways in which this sometimes-glorified destructive impulse may leave the political imagination wanting. To start: only a fine line separates the seasoned collector, who rescues things from the curse of use-value, from the hoarder; and only a camel’s hair lay between these and the mogul of property. Insofar as the allegorical intention converges with a drive to acquisition—that is, as long as the former is founded on seizing elements of the given world so as make them one’s own at the expense of their own capacity to have meaning outside of the context of degradation—what, in the final analysis, it can accomplish will be restricted to a change in the ownership, a nominal shift in the nom du père listed on the title. In other words, the structure of devaluation is left untouched, no matter how furiously the allegorist tears away at the fabric of the phenomenal world of false semblances. By no means does this partial verdict discount wholesale gestures of resistance that are minor and either do not aspire to or cannot be actualized on the scale of the monumental. These remarks, rather, only take heed of what may be occluded when the prospect of redemption leans too heavily on the individual’s creative resources of innovation.

Baudelaire’s practice of re-signification, which certainly here and there allows him to infringe on the dominant cultural order, falls short, even, of a Marxist politics of re-appropriation, whose principle agent is not envisioned to be the solo proprietor, but a mobilized class.

In the context of the Arcades, the more brightly Baudelaire’s spleen was allowed to glow in its isolation, the greater the risk of forfeiting a view of the collective dimensions of disquiet. At times it is difficult to discern whether the gravitation toward the individual is dictated immanently, by Baudelaire’s insistence on an untenable heroism, or extrinsically, by Benjamin’s methodological inclination toward the physiognomic type, which contracts collective experience into the lineaments of a single face. Very often in Das Passagenwerk, as in Les Fleurs du Mal, one hears mention of “the ragpicker,” rather than raggickers acting in concert. This is peculiar given that they not only were subject to mass displacement, as large-scale building projects eliminated improvised settlements in the cités and drove those “nonproductive” bodies, those without an official wage, outside Paris city limits; they also constituted a formidable force of opposition against the large-scale capital projects of Parisian modernization. Haussmann was to Paris what Eugène Poubelle was to the chifonniers. The prefect passed a series of regulations that would standardize garbage collection—at specific times, and in specific receptacles. In protest of this decree, which jeopardized informal practices of subsistence, the raggickers formed a union and rioted and rioted. Together, they were even effective enough to cause the municipal government to halt the introduction of garbage collecting machines.35

While Benjamin is very much concerned with the wishes and dreams of the masses, as well as the prospect of a trans-individual process of social awakening—the collective dimensions of modernity are often extrapolated from images of advertising or from the literary record of subjective experience. Could there, one may wonder, be a cooperative form of allegory? Some sense of raggicking—understood less as a romanticized praxis of the atomized survivor and more as a way

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35 Janine Mileaf, Please Touch: Dada and Surrealist Objects after the Readymade (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 87-91.
of living that was supported in part, by broader communities of subsistence?

That Baudelaire’s spirit of enterprise would not disqualify him from becoming a paragon of Schumpeter’s economic doctrine of “creative destruction” is no ground for dismissing the subversive potential of his art. That said, what I am hoping to underscore about Benjamin’s engagement with Baudelaire is that the latter’s work of allegory is not envisioned as the final negation. Making incisions into the phantasmas, through the individual’s appropriation of objects that had fallen under its spell, does not mark the terminus of political fulfillment. It is precisely at this juncture that the suggested approach to Foucault remains stalled. Extrapolating from Baudelaire’s ironic attempts to transform and heroize the present without annulling it, Foucault advocates for a philosophical reorientation that would be tantamount to the cultivation of an “attitude” necessary for a “critical ontology of ourselves.”

He seeks, in other words, to move away from questions pertaining to the negativity of the limit and toward an investigation of the positive production of the self as an autonomous subject. In doing so, he essentially raises into a philosophical ethos Baudelaire’s preoccupation—which was mediated through the latter’s fascination with dandyism—with the laborious task of self-invention. Some intimation of the geopolitical dimensions of this nexus of interest shine through in Benjamin’s suggestion that the dandy could only ever have been a product of English culture, and only at a moment when the London stock exchange was the epicenter of economic hegemony. Certainly, one may query the presumptions from which Foucault’s theoretical imperative to perform a “permanent critique of ourselves” arises: to begin, how does one comprehend the implicit identity of the first-person plural in this instance; and what bias might revealed in the premium he places on the “practice of liberty,” whose privileged site is the “free” individual, though which knowledge and power are refracted? Conversely, one could argue that such questions are ill-suited, if not misguided, efforts take the Baudelairean tradition to task for a practice of the self that decidedly never had political ambitions and was always meant to be situated in the quasi-autonomous sphere of the aesthetic.

Foucault’s analytic of the technics of self-production, along with his conjunction of critique and the prospect of practical transgression, have yielded much. Even so, it may be worth noticing how this opening of the field of inquiry represents at the same time an anthropocentric contraction around the Western subject and its processes of constitution—a theoretical move that this dissertation has attempted to trace in its various, and sometimes incompatible manifestations. Notwithstanding Foucault’s skepticism of humanism as a viable axis of thought, he effectively institutes a theoretical closure that will make it difficult for the question of de-subjectification to be raised. That is, in turning almost exclusively toward the subject’s work on itself—a practical variant of the idealist commitment to self-reflexivity—he removes from view what cannot find itself at home on the ontological grid of intelligibility that is situated under the rubric of “constitutive subjectivity.” In what way, one may ask, might Foucaultian analytics of self-production have trouble making accommodations for a creature like Odradek?

36 Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, 45.
37 He writes of the emotional division of labor: “The dandy is a creation of the English, who were leaders in world trade. The trade network that spans the globe was in the hands of the London stock exchange; its meshes were subject to extraordinarily varied, numerous, and unforeseeable tremors. a merchant had to react to these, but he could not publicly display his reactions. the dandies took over the management of the conflicts thus created. ...They combined extremely quick reactions with a relaxed, even slack demeanor and facial expression. The tic, which for a time was regarded as fashionable, is, as it were, a clumsy, inferior manifestation of the problem.” (GS1 600; SW# 60)
38 Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, 43.
There is another path that leads elsewhere than the changeable art of self-making. It begins by acknowledging the necessity of, at the very least, one more negative moment beyond Baudelaire’s mitigated drive to world-destruction, which in the end, is redirected toward the fabrication of ego, as an autotelic expression of style and ingenious craft. Allegory would have to be comprehended under the aegis of a negative dialectic: which is to say, if Baudelairean allegory cum self-production breaks objects loose from a coerced identity with their price, such an act of re-designation could not be mistaken for a moment of achieved emancipation. Even the anti-capitalist variant of allegory props itself up on the occlusion of the object that remains non-identical to even the most sterling of allegorical intentions. While Adorno will insist on a practice of vigilance on the part of consciousness with respect to its own claim to identity, Benjamin takes breath in the quasi-voluntary act of self-forgetting, in which, things, first as susurration, begin to emanate their own meaning.

IX. Sensitivites of the Flâneur

This excursus on the allegorical function has provided the necessary context for apprehending the “debasement of things” as a cultural phenomenon in which the literary and economic are interwove. Within modernity, allegory modulates into a new state of ambivalence: it is an instrument that can dislodge things from capitalist conditions of devaluation—principally, from their reduction to the univocal sign of market value. Such amnesty, however, can only be secured through a practice of re-signification, which remains complicit with the coercion of objects into speaking, against themselves, what has been dictated by the allegorist.

If one itinerary inspired by the work of Baudelaire leads to the re-tooling of allegory, but eventually bottoms out into a reflective surface—the scene of the subject taking himself as an object of deliberate grooming and transformation—the question still remains: is there anything that could contravene the object’s devaluation without holding fast to its enmeshment in the nexus of subjective domination? Does allegory contain the resources to dissolve its own order of significance? Would the right practice of allegoresis be sufficient to counteract allegorical violence?

One may recall that the fallout from the object’s devaluation includes the dispossession of the object’s particular meaning and a more thoroughgoing blight on its capacity for address. The object is not annihilated but condemned to a black site in which communication both in and out of this forgotten space is prohibited, and thus, what is said within those walls is effectively rendered non-speech and extricated from the social record. Unlike the contemporary throwback to Heidegger’s notion of the thing, Benjamin does not seek to hypostasize objects as fundamentally withdrawn into a reality that is inaccessible to knowledge and representation; nor does he flatten out all beings, human and otherwise, into the broad category of the object. His inclination, in other words, is not to deepen the isolation of things by means of their ontological sequestration into an indifferent reality; nor to cut off the putative equality of objects from the question of social mediation. The antidote to the degradation of objects is not, then, found in their compensatory elevation in a theoretical practice of respect: that is, not by enforcing a ban on representation (“say nothing about what can never be fully known”) nor by installing the object as a theoretical monstrance, which has sensuous existence that is only the mark of an essential reality that is withdrawn. Rather, one of his attempted responses to the dilemma, as we have already begun to see, is to explore the ways in which historical materialism might admit of a viewpoint of the thing.
So far, this chapter has passed through various ways in which Benjamin accounts for the debasement of things as it is joined to the production of the object’s dumbness, which in turn gives rise to the ontological re-definition of the object as dumb. The two must be understood as discrete. (And here, it must also be emphasized that these operations are not merely a displacement of the process of dehumanization onto the world of things.) We considered, in Benjamin’s early philosophy, how the tendency of human language toward “overnaming” is a cause for nature’s grief; how the Marxist hermeneutic of de-fetishization enforces the commodity’s silence in order to secure the truth of the latter’s illusory animacy; and how allegory, both in its Baroque and modernist incarnations, debases objects in order to deposit in them an extrinsic meaning that they must hold and bear—a process that is envisioned, as a scene in which the object is physically cast down to the floor and exposed to the design of the allegorist.

With a multifaceted vision of the problematic, which, for shorthand, might be referred to as the “debasement of things,” one might have a fuller sense of why, for Benjamin, the literary “conceit” of talking creatures and objects, for which children’s literature was one of the last reservoirs, would be of utmost consequence. From the standpoint of the “scientific” study of literature—which ranges from New Criticism to the structuralist experiment, $/Z—such moments in which voice rises up from an unexpected origin, are thought to exemplify a high quotient of artifice, which is often taken to be the cemark of a deficiency in craft. Seen from a different perspective, however, the more blatant the conceit, the more proximate it draws language to the truth, arguably situated on the ground of literality, that meaning can issue from what is nonhuman. Just as a philosophy that is pre-critical will be difficult to discern from one that is post-critical, a hermeneutic problem arises in the seeming impossibility of distinguishing, within a literary text, when a thing is made to speak (allegory) and when a thing is depicted as emanating its own meaning (listening). This conundrum does not constitute an impasse, so long as the question remains open, how ontological presumptions structure the bifurcation of literal and figural meaning.

We will make a return to this predicament, but before doing so, a further explication of empathy is in order. As I have suggested earlier in this chapter, empathy with the commodity is one such way of admitting a perspective of the thing-world to emerge—without summoning the structure of paternalistic permission. Now, with the scene of allegory established before the mind’s eye, one is perhaps better poised to recognize how the former is, in Benjamin’s thought, placed in dynamic tension with Baudelairean empathy.

Taken together, allegory and empathy constitute one of the many lived antimonies that spurred Baudelaire’s literary career but also marked two divergent modes of engagement with commodity culture that could not always be reconciled. A critical lineage invested in bringing forth a positive characterization of modern, urban subjectivity has tended to favor the side of allegory: that is, the subject’s creative relation to alienated, contemporary reality that, as an efflux of the psychic experience of perpetual defensiveness, develops in the direction of a partially ironic and heroic bearing, which neither refuses nor endorses the world but cultivates an idiosyncratic relationship to it; refuses imperatives of self-consistency, along with those pertaining to the segregation of “high” and “low” aspects of culture; and later in the century, figures into the “waning of affect” that, according to Jameson, characterizes the postmodern condition. To take but one example from a text already mentioned: one sees this preference exerted in Foucault’s rather swift dismissal of the flâneur from the analysis of modern experience. Although he takes Baudelaire as an exemplary

39 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 16.
figure, Foucault’s acceptance of the poet’s vision is contingent on a dis-identification: the attitude of modernity must be sharply distinguished from that of the flâneur; and, even more forcefully, it seems that the modern subject, defined as one who transforms the world, emerges only through a repudiation of the “mere” spectator, “idle, strolling,” “satisfied to keep his eyes open, to pay attention.”

My own reasons for taking note of this ejection of the flâneur from the scene of modernity have less to do with a lament that this character of the Western metropolis does not receive enough airtime than the way that it indexes a broader intolerance for a non-instrumental, receptive stance to the world. The flâneur is excluded—not holistically—but on the grounds of his non-productivity, the “mereness” of his looking on. He is someone who does not “do” anything to experience, does not strive to extract from his acutely ephemeral environment something that can be transformed into an aesthetic object or re-claimed as a resource of the self. A gawker at at heart, he just takes it in, as it were.

The subject of modernity, in Foucault's account, raises itself up on the back of this perceived indolence—as a subject who wishes to be more, to make more of himself than the flâneur. Make no mistake, the modern painter may look like a layabout, but he is, as Foucault assures us, industrious by night. A picture of modernity is constituted by the repudiation of the non-productive body, who lingers in the streets without aim. In this process, the drive toward a non-radical world- and self-transformation is valorized as a joint practice of life and art, and is installed as the essential trait of the subject—as what it means to live in the context of modernity. The problem with such a definition does not lie in the accent on practical activity per se but rather in the implicit devaluation and disavowal of the quality of a potentially profitless perceptiveness.

The historical excision of the flâneur from the period of the modern is a suppression of receptivity as a possible—no less, legitimate—mode of subjective world-engagement. While I am drawing attention to this rather subtle refusal as it is enacted in Foucault’s essay, by no means is this phenomenon restricted to his thought, or even to the literary nexus constituted by the gloaming of Baudelaire. The prejudice arises, among other places, in the the visual arts and incumbent narratives of modernism, which tell the story of how, as the mark begins to announce its presence more boldly on the canvas, the more meaning is redirected away from the world of referential illusion and toward the embodied process of "humanizing nature.” Modernist painting is a form of praxis that makes a show of its own self-constitution.

Insofar as subjectivity is identified with the act of practical appropriation, subjectivation will be a process inscribed into and circumscribed by the operations of production. Within such a view, not only is de-subjectivation put off stage as either a possible experience or object of analysis, but it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine a being that is not at every moment (potentially) at work on a project—even if that project is nothing other than the self. There is, in other words, quite a lot at stake in the late Foucault’s extrapolation of a general problematic of subjectivity from Baudelaire’s physiognomic analysis of modern experience. The extradition of the flâneur from the scene of modernity helps to constitute the theoretical parameters for understanding of how Western subjectivity is and can be (de)constituted. The flâneur, as the embodiment one maximally capable of losing herself, persists like a phantom limb.

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40 Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, 40.
In the “Painter of Modern Life,” Baudelaire attributes to the flâneur a “perceptiveness acute and magical.” The modus operandi of the flâneur: to abandon himself to the crowd “as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy”; and within that intoxicated space of the capital city, newly saturated with commodities, with glorious trash, and with uncountable people hoping to sell off labor-power in order to subsist, to do what looks like little more than just looking. When the flâneur appears in Baudelaire’s essay, incarnated as the painter Constantin Guys, we follow him on an everyday excursion through the metropolis. Through Baudelaire’s eyes, we watch him watching: we see how he throws himself to the multitudes, astutely notes the micro-alterations in Parisian styles of dress, and takes in, almost as if drunk, anything that is made metonymically available to his line of sight. In order to perform the work of portraiture, the essay momentarily shifts into a fictional mode of narration, whose itinerary through the streets bears a resemblance to Poe’s “Man of the Crowd.” It is true that when the sun sets on Paris, and Guys finally returns to his home, he gets to work when the whole city is asleep, and arranges his recent impressions of the urban landscape into the harmony of composition: “The external world is reborn upon his paper.” What Lukács would have referred to as second nature is sublated into a third nature of artistic creation. “All the raw materials with which the memory has loaded itself are put in order”—and the hours of merely looking on are redeemed by the frenzied labors of the imagination, which take place while the proper world of commerce is dormant.

In the long arc that begins with the morning pang (has he already missed out on something to see?) that leads him out to the street and ends with the consummation of his perambulations in the nocturnal transformation of the remnants of the day into a product of spirit—what is traced is nothing other than the production process mapped onto diurnal rhythms, giving them the glow of a natural process. In this sense, Foucault’s reading does justice to the frame narrative that Baudelaire periodically erects: a day in the life of the cultural producer.

One may wonder if this creature—who is very last to linger as the city shuts down, works alone on the night shift, and is up again in with the morning light—ever gets any sleep. True, he is nourished by the energy of being one among the multitudes. He relishes in urban anonymity. Indeed, the frenetic enthusiasm of the flâneur may be the social inverse of the abiding exhaustion of the wage laborer. But in the former’s passion for the lived slogan, art is life, there is a premonition contained within copula’s underbelly, of a regime of work in which the distinction between labor and life is drastically eroded—so that from the first moment one opens one’s eyes to the very last, one is on the clock. In the synthetic view of the day, the whole of waking life is inscribed into a process of industry. The artistic genius is modeled on the diligent laborer who learns to capitalize on his down time. What, according to Baudelaire, distinguishes the sensitive flâneur from the impressionable child is the wherewithal and know-how to be able to “order the mass of raw materials which [he] has involuntarily accumulated.” Maturation is tantamount to the development of the capacity to work—to bring under command what one has experienced of a nature beyond one’s will.

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43 Baudelaire, 9.
44 Baudelaire, 12.
45 Baudelaire, 12.
46 Baudelaire, 8.
One hears, even in this small sample, how Baudelaire’s language sometimes bristles with the consciousness of the entrepreneur, who surveys the “natural environs” and sees “raw material,” looks at fashion to discern what interest can be “extracted” from it, and regards what has befallen him as stock of “accumulated” goods in the storehouse of memory. Seen from the retrospective perspective of completed production—that is, from the endpoint at which materials involuntarily gleaned from the city have been valorized by the artist—the existence of the flâneur will be subordinated and regarded instrumentally as an intermediary period within the career of the *homo faber*, who is trying to scrape by. Put otherwise, the social experience of the flâneur is already under threat of extinction when productivism is the ideological lens through which he is regarded.

How does the presentation of the flâneur alter, as he ambles from “The Painter of the Modern Life” into Benjamin’s *Arcades*? When writing about flânerie, Benjamin combines his two most beloved modes of essayistic engagement: mimesis and citation, which, as he once said when commenting on the work of Karl Kraus, is a “power in which hope still resides that something might survive this age—because it was wrenched from it” (GS2 365; SW2 455). Benjamin’s essays on the arcades imitate Baudelaire’s prose conspicuously. They follow suit in Baudelaire’s penchant for keeping close to street-level—a vantage from which physiognomies can be sketched in fine resolution. For both, juxtaposition is the pattern of experiential thought. Benjamin similarly structures his cultural analysis around personas and objects embedded in the realm of everyday life. Fashion, prostitution, modernity—these are but a few in the catalogue of rubrics that Benjamin will carry forward into the next generation, witnessing how the flâneur morphs into the wandering journalist and how the practice of peregrination becomes capitalized by the institution of department stores—and, one might add, is later supplanted by suburban big box stores, in which everything can be found under a single roof but at the expense of a certain delirium incurred by walking through the vast expanse of monumental aisles, lit evenly by fluorescents, which remain utterly indifferent to the time of day.47

Where the flâneur is concerned, the destructive and salvational literary practice of “swooping down” and wrenching material from the prospect of oblivion cannot be understood narrowly to occur only in grammatical instances of quotation. One may recall that reflections on the flâneur appear in Baudelaire’s essay under the overpopulated heading, “The artist, man of the world, man of the crowd, and child.” In “Paris of the Second Empire,” Benjamin grants the flâneur a section all to his own, grabs hold of him, and restores to him an existence that is not from the start subordinated to the teleological functionalism. He provides more breathing room, as it were, to examine the experience of streetwalking in itself and not solely as it would be placed in service of artistic output. In a letter written in 1939, Adorno criticizes Benjamin’s efforts to approach modernité, simply by falling in step with the gait of the flâneur and attempting seeing what he saw. To do so, he warned, jeopardizes an objective view of capitalist modernity, in which concrete debris of lived experience would be mediated through some grasp of how such particulars related to the social totality.48 Benjamin’s retention of flânerie as an equivocal emblem of modernity is paramount—not least because in the disposition of the flâneur is preserved the prospect of an embodied practice of getting to know the world. The flâneur exhibits a materialist and arguably non-academic orientation to study, which, in Baudelaire’s words, is partially inspired by “an excessive love of visible, tangible things,” an appreciation of their sensuous qualities.49

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48 Adorno’s letter to Benjamin, February 1, 1939, SW4, 201.  
49 Baudelaire, 9.
This attention to the flâneur is by no means Benjamin’s attempt to idealize him or to become a nostalgic apologist for the bohemian tradition of intellectual production that gradually succumbed to the market. In Baudelaire’s account, the flâneur is quite tellingly associated with the Man of the World—the cosmopolitan who “wants to know, understand and appreciate everything that happens on the surface of the globe.”50 What makes his inexhaustible passion for the streets possible may indeed be a certain normativity of the body, a certain inconspicuousness of the skin. He—and the pronoun should be heard in its specificity—experiences no tinge of dread at the prospect of being in public at any hour. His presence will not be deemed suspicious. For the flâneur, who takes pleasure in urban anonymity rather than being punished for it, it is conceivable that the crowd, and the fact of being a mobile body on the street, may be imagined as form of refuge.

In Baudelaire’s playful description of Guys as a “prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito,” an awareness of the flâneur’s entitlement partially breaks through: the image of juvenile sovereignty is padded with the privilege of mobility that would be reserved for he who could proceed through space, racially unmarked, and thus with a nimbus of inviolability that would guarantee he would not get frisked or have his corporeal integrity severely threatened.51 Also described by Baudelaire as an “I” with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I’—the flâneur may be seen as an idealist with an craving for metabolizing otherness or a local incarnation of the intrepid tourist, whose portable imperial comforts are expressed in the expectation of being able to seek out sensuous stimulation from the external world, and “feel at home anywhere.”52

Needless to say, the flâneur is a complex creature, whose import may become harder to discern the more singly on focuses on submitting him to a verdict: too indolent, too inclined toward a voracity for the foreign.53 What is opened up theoretically by Benjamin’s partial appropriation of the figure of urban itinerancy, about which Baudelaire wrote and also adopted himself as a mode of comportment. It is in large part by passing through Baudelaire that Benjamin develops his notion of empathy with the commodity, and in doing so, permits, rather than banishes, self-forgetting from the problematic of commodity fetishism.

A few general remarks might be offered in order to situate this specific itinerary of Benjamin’s thought within his larger project. Benjamin follows in Baudelaire’s footsteps—he syncopates them and without straying too far, helps to situate the flâneur/Baudelaire more precisely within the context of Haussmanization. He offers a fuller sense of his existence within a truly transitional period, a moment of possibility that existed before capitalism and fascism would close in most totally on the revolutionary current that still coursed during the early decades of urban industrialization. Benjamin guides us through the streets of Paris before the entertainment industry had been calcified and monetized; just as the petty bourgeoisie was at the start its decline; and at the historical moment when writing was beginning to feel the incursion of the market but wasn’t yet subsumed by it. Benjamin resists Baudelaire’s conflation of the flâneur with the man of the crowd. The latter was far too manic, and by no means could such behavior be mistaken for the nonchalance of his French counterpart. This may seem like a trivial difference, but Benjamin, in a rather unassuming way is doing the important work of establishing geographical specificity (the economic conditions of

50 Baudelaire, 7.
51 Baudelaire, 9.
52 Baudelaire, 9.
53 On the voracity for otherness, see chapter two of bell hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation (New York: Routledge, 2015).
London had to be differentiated from Paris), tries to find a way to register—through comparative readings—the difficult-to-perceive losses and novelties introduced unevenly and asynchronously by high capitalism. In the discomposure of the man of the crowd, Benjamin finds evidence of how, in the more developed metropolis of London, the streetwalker has been “deprived of the milieu to which he belonged” (GS 1.2 627; SW 4 129). He sensitizes us to the loss that is taking place under the sign of development and offers an account of the afterlives of the flâneur to which Baudelaire did not live to witness. Another difference between the two authors, which may appear marginal, lies in Baudelaire’s interest in the artistic genius who had “sound nerves,” “manhood’s capacities and power of analysis,” and was a subject of “Reason,” but could tap into a childlike sensitivity at will—as if it were a resource at command.\(^\text{54}\) Benjamin is, on the contrary, more interested in childhood itself—that is, not as a skill, but an experience and perceptual orientation that did not rule out mimetic connections, even with the inanimate. He was an avid collector of children’s books, a thoughtful commentator on the cultural history of toys, and his longstanding interest in revolutionary pedagogy for young people culminated in a series of radio broadcast—aired under the title, Aufklärung für Kinder. This is to say that Benjamin is more inclined to consider forms of absorption that are not inscribed within the coordinates of an already enlightened subject of reason—the adult who could willingly suspend rationality, knowing he would have the power to retrieve himself from self-abandon and be able to reintegrate such experiences into an established schema of psychic organization.

\textit{X. Speak, Commodity}

Now, to range in more closely on the element that Benjamin distills from the flâneur’s concoction of urban contingencies. One discovers the following blueprint in Benjamin’s notes:

\begin{quote}
Schema der Einfühlung. Es ist ein doppeltes. Es umfaßt das Erlebnis der Ware und das Erlebnis des Kunden. Das Erlebnis der Ware ist die Einfühlung in den Kunden. Die Einfühlung in den Kunden ist Einfühlung in das Geld. Die Virtuosin dieser Einfühlung ist die Dirne.—Das Erlebnis des Kunden ist Einfühlung in die Ware. Einfühlung in die Ware ist Einfühlung in den Preis (den Tauschwert). Baudelaire war ein Virtuose dieser Einfühlung. Seine Liebe zur Dirne stellt ihre Vollendung dar. (GS 1.3 1178-1179)
\end{quote}

In what ways might our conception of Benjamin’s philosophy of experience be altered, given that \textit{Erlebnis} is extended not only to human actors but also to commodities? What might be meant when, in the remark above and in The Arcades, Benjamin claims that the flâneur is a “virtuoso” of empathy with the commodity (\textit{AP} [M17a,2])? A foray into these questions can be made via Baudelaire’s description of the \textit{flâneur} as a “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness”—a choice metaphor, no doubt.\(^\text{55}\) The kaleidoscope was birthed into the dignified context of scientific research—with treatises detailing its construction and its potential to advance the field of optical research.\(^\text{56}\) Shortly after its invention in the early nineteenth century, it became popularized and mass produced a children’s toy. Its material history is a story of reverse enlightenment or de-maturation: the

\(^{54}\) Baudelaire, 8.

\(^{55}\) Baudelaire, 9.

\(^{56}\) David Brewster, \textit{The Kaleidoscope: Its History, Theory, and Construction} (London: John Murray, 1858), 1858.
kaleidoscope was released from imperatives of knowledge, from its functionality as an instrument of cognition, and was transformed into a household item, used primarily for aesthetic pleasure and entertainment. Comprised of a set of mirrors placed inside a tube, it offers for consumption a phantasmagoria of hallucinatory images in brilliant colors, shifting with the slightest turn of the hand—all while its construction remained hidden to the entranced viewer. With this image, Baudelaire reverses the conventional direction of predication: it is not that living consciousness is reified, but that the thing, which preexists consciousness, is suddenly endowed with human élan; and this inspiroted thing, in turn, is mapped back onto the psyche of the flâneur. The thing occupies the position of the grammatical subject; and consciousness becomes merely a predicate. The flâneur is the embodiment of this confusion, which may resemble the commodity fetish but subjects the latter’s chiastic confusion of object- and subject-fields to an additional transposition, by way of metaphorical torsion.

For Benjamin, this condition is less something to be unequivocally idealized than attended to carefully, even at the risk of losing one’s cool impartiality to the matter at hand. His ambivalence toward Baudelaire’s conception of the flâneur sometimes manifests itself in the turn of an image. In “Zentralpark,” his preparatory study of Baudelaire written in the late thirties, he cites without quotation. “The concepts of the ruling class,” Benjamin writes, “have always been the mirrors that enabled an image of ‘order’ to prevail——The kaleidoscope must be smashed” (GS1 660; SW4 164). If this call to destruction were to be answered, the notion of consciousness to which Baudelaire clings would be first among its ruins.

And yet, Baudelaire continues nevertheless to rove around the central boulevards of Benjamin’s last writings, in large part, I am suggesting, because the itinerant bard offers a way for Benjamin to perform rhetorically the act of ceding his prose to what the commodity has to say. In doing so, he engages Marxism indirectly, often through a feat of perspectival reversal, which takes place through quotation:

Next to Engels’ lucid description, it sounds obscure when Baudelaire writes: “The pleasure of being in a crowd is a mysterious expression of the enjoyment of the multiplication of number.” But this statement becomes clear if one imagines it spoken not only from the viewpoint [Standpunkt] of a person but also from that of a commodity. (GS1 558; SW4 34)

Tonally as well as affectively, the above remark effectuates a turnabout, in that it follows just after Benjamin quotes, at length, Engels’s grim account of walking through the London streets. Reflecting on the “colossal centralization” of the labor force, Engels recounts his difficult journey, his aversion to the fate of the multitudes, as he passes by foot through the metropolitan slums and central arteries:

The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive about it, something against which human nature rebels. The hundreds of thousands of people from every class and rank crowding past each other—are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy? …And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common… (GS1 560; SW4 33)

In this ghastly spectacle of an urban sublime—the endless vehicles, the “heaping together of two and a half million human beings in one place,” the felt infinity that is reminiscent of the endlessness of Kafka’s “An Imperial Message”—Engels sees the city as a space of total dehumanization, utterly
unredeemable (GS 560; SW 43). Urban life is lived only under the sign of a renunciation, made indistinguishable from a loss that leaves the existence of the population mutilated. “Londoners,” Engels writes, drawing attention to the dialectic of barbarism and development, “have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature, in order to bring about all the marvels of civilization which crowd their city” (GS 560; SW 43).

One sees Benjamin’s craft of juxtaposition at its finest when his essay about-faces, and we are presented with Baudelaire’s fondness for the crowd, which stands out in great relief from the abysmal backdrop sketched by Marx’s friend. Indeed, relief has an affective dimension, as the apparent levity of Baudelaire’s enjoyment—a single line—pierces through the long cast of the dispirited scene.

Rhetorically, Benjamin’s reorientation pivots on an act of surprising re-attribution—one that prompts us to double-take, to re-read Baudelaire’s remark as issued by the commodity. What kind of clarity, we may ask, comes from the recognition that the commodity itself is speaking? Or, might there be resistance to such a recognition? One may wonder if it is even possible for a commodity to speak, without that saying becoming just a manner of speaking, a figure. In what way might content of the utterance be changed? Baudelaire’s speech, it seems, is now heard as double voiced. This fissure corresponds less to a single mind of divided consciousness than to the co-presence of the ontologically disparate categories of person and thing, as they are simultaneously embodied in an act of speech. Benjamin suggests that Baudelaire’s remark about the pleasures of being numerous, and the structure of desire from which it emerges, may remain opaque in light of Engels’s repulsion and, more broadly, within a framework that understands literary authorship to be an expression of human subjectivity, even singularity. The opacity arises, too, from the humanism that is the lens through which Engels produces an image of the city as a space of destitution. From this vantage it may be peculiar, if not incomprehensible, that—ideals about species-being notwithstanding—one could find satisfaction in being just another one, let alone, in being just another thing among thousands. It is precisely what Engels finds abhorrent that Baudelaire identifies as exhilarating.

Where Engels sees only “brutal indifference,” Benjamin via Baudelaire sees innumerable opportunities for empathic connection (GS 560; SW 43). From the perspective of someone identified, as Engels seems to be, as a human(ist), the delight in the masses will seem perverse, even asocial.

This peculiarly affirmative stance toward objectification will perhaps resonate with an aesthetic sensibility that emerges in post-war era and is epitomized by Warhol’s insouciant definition of pop art as “liking things.” It would be mistaken, however, to read Benjamin’s keenness for Baudelaire’s affinity with the commodity as a generalized embrace of mass culture. One of the dimensions of empathy is an often diffuse structure of identification—not a liking of something that can be kept distinct from the subject/commodity of desire. At this moment in Benjamin’s essay, it becomes a little easier to discern—even though what Benjamin is doing may look like mere quotation—how empathy with the commodity is doing a bit of work: it is summoned as a response to methodological and epistemic conventions of historical materialism, as well as to the general problematic that we earlier named as the “devaluation of things.” The difference between Engels and Baudelaire’s visions of the crowd may seem to come down to a matter of affective disposition: the familiar contest between the doomsday Marxist, pitted against the insensate optimism of the aesthete. What is being contrasted, albeit subtly, however, is also an epistemic orientation. Without wishing to

make Engels into a mere representative of Marxist thought, he does seem to embody and experience the multitudes from the critical position of the social scientist, who is, as Engels reports, visiting London “for a day or two” (GS1 560; SW4 33). He approaches the city as an object of research in which he is, against himself, immersed. In a role reversal, it is the philosopher who approximates most closely the tourist’s gaze and the flâneur who affirms the city as place of habitation, in which critical distance—or any distance at all from the socius of the commodified—cannot be maintained.

In a way, Benjamin is finding a way, mediated through the poet, to echo Marx’s observation that labor-power is a commodity that the waged worker must continually sell off in order to subsist. But this insight is delivered in a way that does not require identity with the commodified to be disavowed or marked as a corrupted state of existence. Whereas Engels writes as one who is repulsed by the sight of people who have become less than human, Baudelaire’s statement issues from a viewpoint that has relinquished any commitment to the ideal of human nature as the abstract horizon against which the devastation of capitalism can be gauged. In insisting that Baudelaire’s words are spoken as and by a commodity, Benjamin dispenses with the notion that speech is always a manifestation of personhood. This in turn opens up the question, formerly foreclosed, of what commodities might want or enjoy, what forms of desire might be conceivable for one who lives under the sign of thinghood—for one who is not purely on the side of the human. Though Benjamin does not attempt to forge a link himself, empathy would be one opening in his thought that might speak to the condition of forced labor about which Marx has markedly fewer words than he does for the wage worker. “He himself is a commodity,” Marx says of the slave. 58

Benjamin’s practice of citation reveals its versatility, not only in its ability to interrupt and radically re-contextualize Baudelaire’s musings within a new historical constellation but also in making available a margin of play in the act of reattributing this act of speech. One might hear an echo, in Benjamin’s reverse ventriloquism, of Marx’s strategic citation of the misguided economists, who are revealed to be little more than the mouthpiece of the commodity’s delusions. That pedagogical moment, which was discussed earlier in the chapter, is presented once more—only this time, as something of a dialogue.

Marx: Our own intercourse [Unser eigner Verkehr] as commodities proves it. We relate to each other [Wir beziehen uns] merely as exchange-values.” Now listen how those commodities speak through the mouth of the economist: “Value (i.e. exchange-value) is a property of things, riches (i.e. use-value) of man. Value in this sense, necessarily implies exchanges, riches do not.” Riches (use-value are the attribute of man, value is the attribute of commodities. A man or a community is rich, a pearl or a diamond is valuable….A pearl or a diamond is valuable as pearl or diamond.” So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or diamond. (K 110; C 176-77)

Benjamin: If there were such a thing as a commodity-soul…it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would be bound to see every individual as a buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle. Empathy is the nature of the intoxication to which the flâneur abandons himself in the crowd. “The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else, as

he sees fit. Like those roving souls in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes. For him alone, all is open; and if certain places seem closed to him, it is because in his view they are not worth visiting.” The commodity itself is the speaker. (GS1 558; SW4 31-32)

What Benjamin performs here is not quite a negation, but a riff. One may recall that in Marx’s chapter on fetishism, the truth-claims and the claims of speech are bound together in such a way that what/what is speaking and the validity of speech’s content are mutually determining. The equation, stated simply, entails that improper speech—issued from a falsely animated thing—will yield only false knowledge; and, conversely, what is true can only be spoken by a human, who has not been taken possession of by the phantasmagoria. In these gestures that resemble Marx’s own experiments, Benjamin insists on identifying and locating a voice in a place we would not anticipate. Benjamin speaks back to Marx, albeit indirectly, by conferring speech to the commodity, rather than using quotation, as Marx does, to open a perspective with the intent of shutting it down. Such a perspective is by no means idealized: picking up on Baudelaire’s Parisian prince of the streets, Benjamin calls the flâneur out on exuding the peerless ease of a parasitic sovereign for whom anyone and anything can be made to lie at the disposal of his eye (GS1 558; SW4 32-33).

It is possible to read this citational practice as an act of allegorical production—one that involves him instilling into the commodity a foreign significance—putting words into its mouth, as it were. But it seems, rather, that he is trying, across repeated efforts, to insist, albeit through a circuitous engagement with Marx, to validate the experience of the commodity, which Marx gives voice to—only so that he can ultimately stifle it. Here and in the previous passage, Benjamin seems committed to the notion that certain aspects of capitalist modernity, if they are not to remain in the dark, must be considered from the side of the thing—and further, that such a perspective is neither impossible nor fantastic, but hardly without its own powers of elucidation. Disarticulating the link between epistemic certitude and the propriety of speech as a faculty belonging only to the human subject, he makes it possible for he commodity to have its voice back, and with it, to speak its truth.

Benjamin’s attempt to correct for the selective hearing that helps to secure economic objectivity in the course of Marx’s argument is also an effort to counteract a tendency—one that is not strictly a technical feature per se but nevertheless generates truth-effects. A glimpse of this discursive phenomenon can be caught in Marx’s attempt to make a scientific distinction that unravels into a series of insults:

…what in particular distinguishes a commodity from its owner is the fact, that it looks upon every other commodity as but the form of appearance of its own value. A born leveller and a cynic, it is always ready to exchange not only soul, but body, with any and every other commodity, be it more repulsive [ausgestattet mit mehr Unannehmlichkeiten] than Maritornes herself. (K 114; C 179)

This is a specimen of what can be called, idiomatically, commodity contempt. For a brief moment, the object of exchange is once again rendered animate. Marx personifies the commodity—gives it a gaze, a birth, even a potential affiliation with a political party—only to show what a diminished life it has. Superficial to the core, the commodity sees only appearances. This revulsion at uninhibited exchangeability—at the reduction of all things to a common denominator that effaces any and all social distinctions—is amplified through the specter of the undesirable woman, who all of a sudden is admitted into an economy of desire that is no longer restricted, but abhorrently general: there is
no limit to what is for sale, no quality control, and anything is eligible to have economic intercourse with anything else. The undercurrent of his analysis is a sense of what constitutes good and bad attachment: a virtuous cathexis invests in what cannot be traded or substituted. Marx inscribes the commodity fetish into a generalized scene of prostitution that is to be indicted, at the very same time that truth is produced—a truth that pertains both to the distinction between owner and commodity and also to his earlier assertion that, “on the economic stage,” things encounter each other, personified, as “bearers of economic relations” (K 114; C 179). Marx’s argument is rhetorically complex: he enacts (brings the commodity to life) so as to show how disenchancing this enchanted state is; and does so by referencing the enchanted world of Cervantes’s novel, which he likewise pierces through. Maritornes, who is brought into the discussion to testify, rather one-dimensionally, to the ugliness of the woman’s body as an object of potential exchange, functions as the cornerstone of disillusion, which, when removed, will send the entire chimera tumbling down. In Marx’s hands the picaresque becomes rather dour. This critical operation of de-fetishization turns on a strong, and almost visceral disavowal of this woman’s body as legitimate object-choice, and, according to the logic of substitution Marx sets into play, a disavowal of the desirability of the general object (that is subject to exchange). The commodity cannot be animated because it—she cannot possibly be wanted or loved.

In Adorno and Benjamin’s epistolary exchange of 1939, Don Quixote plays a part in their back-and-forth about commodity fetishism. Unlike Lukács, who reads the novel as the “first great battle of interiority against the prosaic vulgarity of outward life” and sees it as a literary work that cannily registers how the genre of chivalric romance no longer had a viable horizon of transcendence, Benjamin interprets Cervantes less grandiosely as someone who sets humor alight to disrupt the sheen of reality. He associates Don Quixote with the rapture of commodities, in that the adventurer “invariably perceives the same thing,” no matter how disparate the situation. When Don Quixote walks into an inn, he steps foot no less than a castle. The hallucination of equality enabled by a commodity-economy is, Benjamin suspects, the root of abstract political ideals of égalité. In this regard, Benjamin’s reading proves consonant with the spirit of Marx’s diagnosis of the leveling effects engendered by the predominance of exchange-over use-value (CC 301-310). And yet, it does seem that this theoretical recognition does not likewise lead to or rest upon an insistence that the commodity be held in contempt, or that its perspective be abandoned.

59 Maritornes is dragged into the pages of Kapital from the enchanted world of Don Quixote—primarily so that she can have a sobering effect on Marx’s readers. A half-blind servant girl whose rude appearance and foul breath is the butt of Cervantes’s jokes, she is summoned here to serve as an exemplar of a grotesque object of exchange, the spoiled conquest of the all those whose senses have been impaired by delusion. Maritornes is a vehicle—the embodiment of crude material—onto which Don Quixote’s illusions are projected, the ground of his foolhardy mis-recognition of economic and romantic value, which, in his addled mind, are twain: “[Don Quixote] seized her by the wrist and…forced her to sit on the bed. Then he touched her chemise, and thought it was made of burlap, to him it seemed the finest and sheerest silk. On her wrists she wore glass beads, but he imagined them to be precious pearls for the Orient. Her tresses, which were rather like a horse’s mane, he deemed strands of shining Arabian gold whose brilliance made the sun seem dim.” Fittingly, for the chivalric, inflation is the psychic mechanism of distortion. What Marx presents as the commodity’s general disposition—ready to pounce on anything else for a transaction of soul and body—is a one-sided account told from the perspective of the anachronistic knight who coerces the servant into his tireless fantasy. Marx’s attempt to read Don Quixote as an allegory of the fetish breaks down, in the face of her resistance to the fungibility into which the knight unsuccessfully conscripts her. In Cervantes’s story, Maritornes is not nearly so easy; in fact, she is most unwilling to be taken for someone else, and when she tries to free herself from the knight’s advances, a riot breaks out. It seems, as in the passage analyzed in this chapter, the unwillingness of the (feminized and infantilized) commodity to its own conditions of exchange is present within Marx’s text only marginally.

On the contrary, Benjamin keeps close to the commodity, and even suggests that what it undergoes constitutes a form of experience, which he attempts to bring to the fore—in spite of Adorno’s allegations that do to so yields only a partial analysis that is merely “metaphorical” (CC 300). In the following comment addressed to Adorno, a variation of which appears in Konvolut M, Benajmin reconsiders the phenomenon of allegory/price—not from the perspective of the allegorist, as he had done before, but from that of the thing, going in search of a customer to take it home:

Die Ware fühlt sich … nicht nur und nicht sowohl in den Käufern ein, denn vor allem in ihren Preis. Eben darin aber stimmt der Flâneur sich auf die Ware ab; er tut es ihr durchaus nach; in Ermangelung der Nachfrage, das heißt eines Marktpreises für ihn, richtet er sich in der Käuflichkeit selbst häuslich ein. Der Flaneur überbietet die Hure darin; er führt gleichsam ihren abstrakten Begriff spazieren. (GS1 1115)

The commodity empathizes… not only and not merely with the buyer, but above all with its price. Even in this, however, the flâneur attunes [stimmt …ab] himself to the commodity; he imitates it utterly; for want of demand—that is, for his want of a market price—he makes himself thoroughly at home in the world of purchasability [Käuflichkeit]. In this, he even outdoes [überbietet] the whore; he takes her abstract concept on a stroll, so to speak. (CC 310)

The flâneur, a creature who certainly has not forgotten the mimetic comportment, is hardly one for strong renunciations of the object-world. Rather, emergent in his relation to the market is a structure of identification that transverses the human-thing dichotomy. Taking to the streets after the decline of the patronage system but before the rise of the culture industry, the flâneur is both an anachronism and before his time. Placeless, he is elsewhere described by Benjamin as someone who has been “uprooted”—someone who is “at home neither in his class nor in his homeland” (AP 895). Because there is hardly any want for him who carries on in a state of non-belonging, he throws himself to the arcades, where he moves himself among other things for sale.

XI. Lyric Expropriation

Roughly a year and a half before Benjamin’s death at the Spanish border, Adorno expresses to Benjamin that he doubts that “the concept of empathy with the inorganic matter yields anything decisive” (SW4 205). It is uncertain whether it was intended to be concept in the first place—that is, a product of cognition that had the power to subsume particulars under its ambit. But it is worth asking nonetheless whether, as Adorno feared, empathy risks “subjectifying the phantasmagoria,” and whether, like the inconstancies of a bad trip, such moments of expropriation would ultimately lead back to their re-absorption into the storehouse of personal memory (SW4 101).

These questions are compounded when Benjamin (either perversely or rather hopefully) takes them up within the literary tradition of the lyric—a genre that has historically been identified with the expression of subjectivity. One of Baudelaire’s qualities that most captivated Benjamin could very well have been said about himself. Baudelaire, he writes in what he thought would become the second part of the Passagenwerk, had a “sensitive disposition” [sensitive Anlage] that resonated powerfully with the commodity fetish”: “empathy with inorganic things…was one of his sources of
inspiration” (GS1 558; SW4 34). And like the masses whose ability to find enjoyment in society depended on not spurning [verschmähen] their partial identification with the things at market—uneasy as that could sometimes be—Baudelaire meets the presentiment of his class’s destiny “with a sensorium that discerns charm even in what is damaged and decaying [das auch Bestoßenem und Faulendem noch die Reize abmerkt] (GS1 558; SW4 34, translation modified). In a footnote of “Paris of the Second Empire” Benjamin turns his ear toward what, within Baudelaire’s lyric, he hears as an expression of this collective mode of perception, at a time when it was still new:

There is scarcely a single poet before Baudelaire who wrote a verse anything like “Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées” (Oeuvres, vol. 1, p. 86) [“I am an old boudoir full of faded roses”]. The poem is entirely based on empathy with the material, which is dead in a dual sense. It is inorganic matter [and] matter than has been eliminated from the circulation process. (GS1 558; SW4 80).

Diana Fuss has written about the impossible utterances that are given voice in the genre of the corpse poem—those lyrics whose central conceit is to make the deceased, human body speak. What Benjamin struggles to draw out in his incomplete analysis of “empathy with the inorganic” is perhaps a cousin to the archive of necro-poetry, but with the important difference that human interiority is not even available as a specter or memory that can anchor the origin of voice.

In the literary record, empathy, which, according to Benjamin, is not unethered from a historical referent, appears under the guise of artifice. Doesn’t the as if permeate and unravel any claim of identity between bard and boudoir? Are his poems not undergirded by the fetishist’s structure of belief?

What the I enunciates is neither a human subject nor a thing but the intermediary zone between them—an un-resolvable animacy that cannot be set straight even if one has a conceptual grasp of the mechanics of distortion. Such a distortion could, to be sure, be written off as a deceit, but doing so would see immediately past the image, that is, neglect what the poem offers up for phenomenological engagement. The astute reader of lyric, in other words, does not tread about, rending from poetic image the potency of its semblance. And just as any interpretation of verse that counts itself rich by reducing a poem to a depository of contrivances effectively bankrupts it, to see through to the reality of false consciousness, would, in a certain way, shortchange the social experience that Baudelaire is attempting to portray. Hence, Benjamin’s effort to consider the commodity as poetic object.

It is worth noting that what has been delivered to us as Das Passagenwerk originally bore the title, Charles Baudelaire: Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus. Benjamin regarded the lyric as an art-form that had fallen into disuse. As someone whose ideas lit up most brightly when encountering a threshold—an uncertain space-time when things might have gone another way—Benjamin gravitates toward Baudelaire because he believed him to be on the cusp of an era in which poetry would no longer enjoy success on a mass scale. Information, whose exemplary steward is journalism would—with its imperatives of clarity and brevity—increasingly supplant all other forms of communication, including the transmission of experience via storytelling. Alongside this historical trajectory, one must also keep in mind that, where Benjamin is concerned, lyric is understood less as a genre, than as a language. That is to say, its very fiber is not exclusively woven from the work of

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human conventions, which are sedimented into tradition—as an inventory of device, form, and motif. Indeed, the very notion of genre, its Hellenic origins notwithstanding, might be viewed as a part of the historical transformation Benjamin endeavors to bring to light. The predominance of classificatory schema in the field of cultural production and the degree to which the marketplace mediates how literary works are produced and engaged first and foremost as instances of a genre parallels the phantasmagoria of the ever-same—one that is epitomized on the street, by the “anguish of the city dweller who is unable to break the magic circle of types even though he cultivates the most eccentric peculiarities” (GSV. 1 71; AP 22). Lyric, which exceeds genre, is a language among other languages—meaning that every one of its similes roosts itself within a medium that partakes in similitude.

Lyric lent itself to the apprehension of Baudelaire’s historical moment as one of transition, insofar as poetry was itself on the brink of succumbing to new irrelevance in the context of the market. More than this timeliness, however, lyric poetry offers a popular discursive milieu in which, perhaps second only to cartoons and fairy tales, the distinction between persons and things is rather pliable. We have observed, in the course of these reflections on Benjamin, how capitalism is capable of inducing alterations to both subject- and object-fields that are not, as he writes of allegory, resolvable into psychological determinations. These transformations are afforded new parameters of recognizability when mediated by a literary craft that can likewise suspend or envision, while being unable to actualize empirically, changes in the ontological fabric of social experience. Poetry, furthermore, would not be nearly as beholden to the presumptions of veracity, which haunted the photographic medium in its early days. The inhuman metamorphoses envisaged by lyric—such as the true improbability of “I am an old boudoir”—would perhaps have a greater chance of being attended to carefully, embedded as they were in the context of hermeneutic practices that inclined to give consideration to such conceits, rather than to evaluate them primarily according to a criterion of verisimilitude.

Adorno’s concern that Benjamin is in jeopardy of winnowing an objective phenomenon into a matter of subjective comportment recurs in the domain of the aesthetic, in anxieties about lyric being unable to break free of expressive consciousness. In order to address this objection, one would have to consider whether literary practices of empathy reflect a purely subjective dimension of experience, or whether, turning lyric against its own historical affiliation with inwardness, empathy unseats the human subject where it is most prominently featured. Does empathy differ in any way from psychic identification, or an idiosyncratic projection of the structure of alienated consciousness onto the objects nearby? Is the boudoir of Baudelaire’s “Spleen” anything more than a receptacle of the poet’s consciousness? Does Baudelaire do anything other than put on display, to borrow Lukács recriminating phrase, “the charnel house of long-dead interiorities”?

Certainly, it might be tempting to diffusse the connection with old wares into a question of personal sensibility—the likely candidates being either the preciousness of the collector or the edgier taste for what is broken off and outmoded—very often associated with surrealism. Empathy with the commodity, however, is not reducible to a practice of aesthetic appreciation or judgment, even though within it both may be at play. Although it is through the physiognomic analysis of Baudelaire that this phenomenon flashes into view, empathy is not rooted in the individual—and even less in the auteur. It is trans-personal, extra-subjective, and, where Benjamin’s historical argument is concerned, was a pivotal aspect of the collective experience of Europe’s nineteenth-century masses. “The world exhibitions,” he proposes, “were training schools in which the masses,

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62 Lukács, Theory of the Novel, 64.
barred from consuming, learned empathy with exchange value. “Look at everything; touch nothing” [G 16, 6]. Encountering the noli me tangere issuing from the world of goods made visible but not affordable, those without the economic power to possess form a relationship to commodities that deviates from the categories offered by political economy. This experience of feeling one’s way into aestheticized commodities could neither be fully encompassed by the category of consumption nor by a politics of work.

Benjamin singles out, as those for whom empathy with the commodity is especially prescient, Parisian déclasses, prostitutes, and sandwich men. The final of these figures, Benjamin surmises, is the “last incarnation” of the flâneur (AP [M17a,2]). Brought under the wage relation, the sandwich-man represents the exploitation of urban wandering. For these workers, conscripted to walk the streets with a placard around their necks—or seen from the perspective of the passerby, these advertisements only intermittently recognized as being propelled by human step—social invisibility had a distinctly corporeal dimension. In the 1915 novel, H.R., written by the Wall Street journalist Edwin Lefévre, the sandwich man is rendered—almost the spitting image of Baudelaire—as “a corpse on foot, with a concealed galvanic battery somewhere.”63 It is true that this urban worker embodied, as Benjamin suggests, a final stage of industry’s conquest of commodity empathy, in which the spontaneity once exercised in walking the streets was utterly sapped.64 Benjamin perhaps did not recognize the dialectical reversal that lay in the wings: the sandwich man may indeed have been the flâneur’s last instantiation, but he is simultaneously the early harbinger of the seasoned picketer. In H.R., the sandwichmen of Fifth Avenue participate in an act of collective allegory, as they walk the Manhattan streets with new messages written on their boards: “Yesterday I walked 19 miles. / They paid me 35 cents cash / and 2 meal tickets.”65 This gesture of appropriation cannot be said to accomplish a full re-subjectivation. Nor does it dispel the conditions of reification. Nonetheless, the I rises up from the objectified, without transcending it.

It can appear, at times, that Baudelaire, via the type of the flâneur, is permitted to speak on behalf of the experience of all things, all commodities, in such a way that simply recapitulates, only within the object-field, arguments that regard Baudelaire as the paradigmatic subject of modernity. It seems, however, that Benjamin complicates such accounts, and prompts us to consider whether the very notion of subjectivity is elastic enough to accommodate what is so thoroughly permeated by thinghood, and conversely, whether standing conceptions of things as inert and unmoving may in turn be inadequate in their rigidity. One could, to be sure, make recourse to the terminology of “reified consciousness,” which in History and Class Consciousness, which Benjamin read in 1928. In this work, Lukács defines the reified in terms of a litany of incapacities: it cannot recognize, let alone perceive the intersubjective relations that are involved in its dealings with commodities; it doesn’t grasp the delusion written into its own sense of authentic immediacy; and perhaps most damningly, it “does not even attempt to transcend [itself].”66 Citing Simmel as a thinker who ineffectually analyzes capital

64 Writing in Down and Out in Paris and London, George Orwell details the working conditions of sandwich men, in which contemporary readers might recognize the model of casualization that has become newly prevalent in post-Fordist economies: “They are paid about three shillings a day for ten hours’ work—it is hard work, especially in windy weather, and there is no skulking, for an inspector comes round frequently to see that the men are on their beat. To add to their troubles, they are only engaged by the day, or sometimes for three days, never weekly, so they have to wait hours for their job every morning” (179).
65 Lefevre, 52.
from the perspective of reified consciousness, Lukács criticizes him for failing to “go further than [the] description” of the “perverted, topsy-turvy world.” Lukács goes on to make a criticism, one to which, no doubt, Benjamin might also be vulnerable, that Simmel, while perceptive in terms of “matters of detail,” remains only superficially engaged with phenomena that are “furthest from the real life-process of capitalism.” Only from the point of view of the totality, Lukács insists, can reification be truly grasped. This means, first and foremost, that the theoretical privilege granted to the individual by bourgeois society would have to be undermined, and second, that grasping the deep economic structure of capitalism, along with its reality-effects, would depend on a decisive refusal of a position immanent to reified consciousness, coupled with an activation of the proletarian class into its own self-consciousness as both object and subject of history.

What, then, do we make of Benjamin’s penchant for keeping company with the flâneur—for staying on ground-level, without exercising the strong powers of differentiation from the objectified masses, as Engels does in his description of London and as Lukács advocates for in History of Class Consciousness? I would suggest, first, that “reified consciousness” is too narrow a concept to encapsulate the broad range of experience that Benjamin draws into vision, as he seeks to wrest thinghood from the conditions of its devaluation. Even in a society that tended toward “total reification,” Benjamin finds elements of the world that exceed capital, though in practical terms, they may be subsumed by it. Thus, he exhibits Baudelaire in a state of “petrified unrest,” the commodity-soul aflame, reified consciousness in motion (J55, a). Benajmin’s tenacious quotation of concrete details, what Adorno refers to as the “wide-eyed presentation of mere facticity,” doesn’t amount to an endorsement of the course of the world as it is. Nor are his assemblages merely descriptive or devoid of an emancipatory horizon, although sometimes the latter can only manifest fleetingly as a hope in the past (SW4 102).

His lingering, rather, is perhaps better understood as an effort to resist signing off this-world-now to a stage of enlightenment that lay in the future, from whose vantage, like the end that extends its shadow over the means which are subordinated within a chain of instrumental reason, would proleptically recast the present as always diminished and ignorant. Through the materials he gathers on Baudelaire, Benjamin opens up a space in which the experience of those who, according to the ontological order of capitalism, are not fully human can be apprehended at a moment in which unfreedom is a condition of subsistence. From this point of view, it becomes possible not only to criticize as deficient the partiality of lived experience, but to ask, “what can a commodity do? what might it want? how is its history recognizable, and can is impressionlessness be seen through, from two sides of the medallion, onto which allegory and price are inscribed?” His lingering, testifies, finally, to a conviction that it is not through human praxis alone that the object-field can be reconstituted, or shaken into new arrangements. The necessary complement of his dialectics at a standstill is the Zwischenzeit—the meantime, in which, like a single loose rock of falling from a façade pressages a whole city in ruin, the brief lapse of the imago of the human unseals political possibilities, yet unforeseen.

Along with the shift in tenor, though which the time one does as an object is not wholly condemned or sacrificed to a future that is imagined to lie, as if spatially on a continuum, just further ahead, Benjamin introduces live-ability as a criterion of apprehension. In doing so, he throws into question the imperative to epistemic excavation, whose basis is the presumption that the further one strays

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67 Ibid., 95.
68 Ibid., 95.
from the economic structure, the less “real” things become. In this sense, one might say that it is through his investigation of the spectator thrown to the crowd—who, from an orthodox view, would be regarded as just another specimen of the vita contemplativa—that Benjamin introduces a practical dimension into materialist theory. In his studies of Baudelaire, the language of habitability, refuge, and the struggle to feel at home recurs, like a visitation of images during a turbulent sleep. Under this rebus, the crowd appears once more, identified as

...the newest asylum of outlaws; it is also the latest narcotic for people who have been abandoned. The flâneur is someone abandoned in the crowd. he is thus in the same situation as the commodity. he is unaware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him; it permeates him blissfully, like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. (\textit{GS}1 557; \textit{SW}4 34)

If the commodity-form had become the dominant form of objectivity, the question arises as to how historical materialism may be possible for those who have been lost to this world—that is, without mandating their exile, in the words of Pietz, to “the impossible home of a man without fetishes.”

\textbf{XII. Empathy at Large}

Unlike nineteenth-century, liberal accounts of sympathy, Benjamin does not charge empathy with the commodity with a prescriptive force. He does, however, invest in it with a significance, which he never expresses transparently, but whose implications can be drawn out, piece by piece, from a larger skein. Three threads, I would like to suggest in closing, tie empathy with the commodity—as it emerges from an engagement with Baudelaire—to a broader set of concerns. First, the willing surrender to the masses, the cultivated thirst for the thrill of sensuous stimuli sought out in the world of sale-able goods, the great comforts and delight taken in the external show of semblance—these elements contain a premonition of the absorption that would be commercialized and taken under command by the burgeoning business of mass entertainment. Benjamin is proposing, in other words, a prehistory of the culture industry—one which starts to take off when large numbers of workers make a “pilgrimage to the commodity fetish” at the World’s Fair, where new commodities are on put on display—elevated, literally, on raised platforms, as if works of art (\textit{AP} 7, \textit{GS}5.1 64). The devastating permutations of the distracted sensorium under late capitalism are rehearsed in Adorno and Horkheimer’s \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, among other texts. The story Adorno tells is one of the extinguishing of the radical potential that Benjamin once located in cinema’s ability to break open an optical unconscious, along with the chance of reversal that was believed to lie within fetishism, which could be inflected differently, not solely as a source of coercion, but as a partial freedom from instrumentality. All these margins of revolutionary possibility were left utterly sapped by a culture industry committed to ideological deception on a mass scale. Here, a distinction that Benjamin makes in the “Technical Reproducibility” essay proves relevant: “A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves” (\textit{SW}3 119). According to Adorno, not only does the latter come to prevail, as culture succumbs to advertisement and entertainment becomes increasingly an instrument of conformism that dispenses a uniformly empty ego-ideal to the collective. He suggests, too, that the mimetic impulse degrades even further into a

\begin{footnotesize}
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“compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities which, at the same time, they recognize as false (136). His is a vision of empathy turned into pathology.

Writing some years later, Benjamin will wonder, in a short remark in one of his convolutes, whether empathy with exchange value—learned by the masses at the monumental grand expositions—was what enabled people to succumb so readily to the “total experience” of the fascist spectacle (AP [m1, a5]). Indeed, this collective experience of ceding the will to all that is on display resonates with what Jameson describes as the “structural exclusion of memory,” the abolishment of critical distance, which he associates with the medium of television and with commercials in particular.]

Although this narcotic variant of empathy devolves variously in the twentieth century into lethal obedience to a purified species determined to obliterate any trace of individuality, or into collective consciousness signed over to the society of the spectacle, one must remember that empathy is not exhausted by these historical outcomes. Persistently, Benjamin reads for the slightest lining of hope that illuminates as eminently contingent what the victors’ history presents as inexorable law of the real—or even fate. In the material he gathers on the World’s Exhibitions, Benjamin calls attention to how these gatherings of the proletariat had the potential, admittedly short-lived, to double as rare occasions during which the labor force could assemble en masse and possibly organize itself. He even finds a furrow of redemption in the otherwise condemnable condition of commodity fetishism, insofar as it holds the potential for things to have a life beyond what is stipulated by their use- and exchange-values. In short, empathy with the commodity must not be brutally severed from even its most tenuous potentialities, which the history of progress seems, nonetheless, to have foreclosed.

Apart from accounting for a structure of consumer desire, in which identification and distraction converge, empathy marks the possibility of self-expropriation, which may be located on a continuum with other modes of self-forgetting and mimesis that have been remarked upon here and in the previous chapter. If, as Benjamin asserts, the “devaluation of the world of things in allegory is surpassed...by the commodity,” receptivity to what has been commodified is a response to a compromised state of affairs that does not, as the allegorist does, run roughshod over objects in order to save them (GS1 659; SW4 164). In this sense, empathy with the commodity may be thought of as a necessary but insufficient condition for contravening the degradation of the object-world, which is inflicted by the reign of price and, to a lesser degree, by the subject who raises things up to a new significance by subordinating the objects that are made to bear it.

Empathy breaks open the boundedness of a subject and its self-constitution. And, insofar as it entails an orientation to commodities that doesn’t seek to shut them out from the space of identity, empathy contains the promise that what has been repressed into forgetting, but nonetheless continues to be transmitted through the world of commodities, might break through to perceptibility. As Adorno contends, glossing the phenomenon of the fetish, the commodity appears supernatural because it effaces the process by which it came into being; it takes on a sacral appearance because the labor that engendered it can no longer be recognized. To this, one might add that the obscured histories of which the commodity world is an unconscious bearer must not be regarded as restrictively human. The category of “labor”—insofar as it presumes that such an activity will only name the waged activity of the human—is already an index of alienation. Simply because receptivity cannot, by definition, be protected from certain forms of corruption is no ground for excising it from thought.

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Finally, as mentioned at the start of this chapter, empathy with the inorganic is the gateway through which Benjamin makes a discursively specific intervention into Western Marxism, so as to admit of a perspective of the thing. In doing so, he gestures toward a method in which materialist analysis would not have to be comprehended from a nonexistent bunker into which the phantasmagoria had not penetrated, nor from a transcendent position, from which the distorting effects of the commodity-form would be looked upon as “mere illusion” rather than as condition of life. Just as Baudelaire is said to “evoked the corpse from within”—and not only from the outside as Baroque allegory did—empathy with the commodity is an attempt to think the reified world immanently—through a solidarity with what is not wholly, or even partially, human (O 186; AP [J56, 2]).
Coda

Though my position is of low degree
And all the others may look down on me,
I'll go smiling through,
That's if I have you.
I am the happiest of troubadours
Thinking of you while I'm massaging floors,
At my leisure time,
I made up this rhyme;

I will be the oil can
If you'll be the oil,
Then we both could mingle
Every time we toil.
...
I will be your shoe brush
If you'll be my shoe,
Then I'll keep you bright dear,
Still feeling good as new!

If you'll be my razor,
I will be your blade,
That's a porter's love song
To a chambermaid.

I will be the dustpan
if you'll be the broom
we can work together
all around the room

I can be the clothespin
Be my pulley line.
We'll hang out together
Wouldn't that be fine.

— “A Porter’s Love Song to a Chambermaid” (1930)
   Lyrics written by Andy Razaf, composed by James P. Johnson,
   performed by Fats Waller

This chapter has suggested that Benjamin’s idiosyncratic materialism seeks to make available a social grammar for those whose claim to human subjectivity remains tenuous, if it is able to be made at all. If one were to delineate this problematic within the framework of Marxist theories of reification, which it no doubt exceeds, one might say that Benjamin pursues a philosophy of experience for those whose existence cannot be fully assimilated to the category of the human, in part because something living in them—something of the vastness that is only hinted at by the abstraction that is “labor-power”—has been captured by capitalist processes of accumulation. If we follow Adorno’s
suggestion that “the fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness, but is
dialectical in the crucial sense that it produces consciousness,” the question arises as to how critical
thought might respond to commodity fetishism—once it is recognized as one of the enabling
conditions of experience” (SW# 54).

A well-worn hermeneutic path travels some distance from a state of belief that is believed to be
under the spell of deception. Doing so enables one to witness, from afar, the other in a state of
fetishistic absorption. Safely removed from a space of trust in appearances, one can rectify the
mistaken judgment of the believer and produce a discourse of truth about falsehood. But things
appear differently from the standpoint of those who cannot afford or do not wish to take up the
distance of incredulity—or, put otherwise, those unable to maintain themselves in a state
unadulterated by reification. From this perspective—and notice how to elaborate empathy with the
commodity, in some sense, requires one to perform it—to identify primarily and fully as a subject
would be to turn one’s back on lived experience.

Where reification is concerned, Benjamin is less avid in exposing its than in tending to the bind
generated by a hermeneutics of suspicion that would lead to its identification—namely, that to reject
reified existence would be to refuse not only the bad object within but also sociality itself.
Perhaps even more effectively than Baudelaire’s poetry, which at times represents the experience of
commodity fetishism only at the cost of lapsing into an isolationism from which the social must be
extrapolated, “A Porter’s Love-Song” shares in Benjamin’s spirit of contravening the assumption
that a repudiation of what is nonhuman is a precondition for entering the field of sociality and eros.

“A Porter’s Love-Song” is, I would suggest, empathy with the inorganic set to music. Its difficulty
lies in the complete ease with which it finds itself at home among the world of things. The inviting
provocation of the song is to explore the relational possibilities that emerge among those whose
identification with common objects is not repressed, but embraced in such a way that, to the skeptic,
might seem indistinguishable from total adequation to the lived conditions of exploitation.
I also offer this composition as something of a companion piece and counterpart to T.S. Eliot’s
“Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which has long been taken up as a paradigmatic instance of the
modernist lyric—as a sounding ground for interiority that is alienated, eloquent, but not necessarily
outwardly communicative about its alienation, and holds the field of (romantic) action as if
standing behind thick, aquarium glass.

“A Porter’s Love-Song” inflects the modernist moment differently—orienting both addressee and
audience less toward the the internal struggle of individual consciousness who feels his spirit to be
partially anesthetized by modernity than to the play that might sustain relation, even when the
conditions for mutual recognition—which produces the human—may be compromised. The
contrast I am drawing out lies in slight difference between failed intersubjectivity and a form of
relation that does not take intersubjectivity as an aspirational horizon, nor refuses to accept the
“mereness” that is often attributed to nonhuman existence.

Briefly, I would also like to distinguish the relationality envisioned by this song from the queer
utopianism that Jose Muñoz locates in post-war American art. Muñoz takes notice of the strange
buoyancy of Andy Warhol’s refusal to refuse mass culture. Warhol, Muñoz recalls, had a habit of
saying things like “wow” and “gee,” and wrote things like
What’s great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good.\footnote{Andy Warhol, \textit{The Philosophy of Andy Warhol} (New York: Harvest Books, 1977), 100.}

Alongside this unlikely mirth in the face of what might appear to modernist sensibility as an unredeemable culture industry, Muñoz places Frank O’Hara’s enduring capacity to be astonished by the utterly banal. He suggests that in O’Hara’s poem “Having a Coke With You,” the poet is able to “detect an opening and indeterminacy in what for many people is a locked-down dead commodity.”\footnote{Jose Muñoz, \textit{Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity} (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 9.} In both instances, it is the occasion of consumption that releases the potential of a queer relationality that is yet to come.

Though this affirmative disposition toward the aphrodisiacal qualities of the goods of industrial production may seem akin to the affection expressed in “A Porter’s Love-Song,” the latter piece strikes a somewhat different chord—with different harmonics of queer desire. Razaf’s composition draws from decades of experience working in the racialized service industry of early twentieth-century Harlem. “A Porter’s Love-Song” was first performed as part of a longer musical called the \textit{Kitchen Mechanic’s Revue}—“kitchen mechanic” being slang for maids, cooks, porters, and anyone putting in hours in this sector of urban of employment. Razaf and Johnson’s homage to the black working class was commissioned for a show at \textit{Smalls Paradise}, a 1,500-seat mixed-race club on 135th Street, which occasionally featured waiters on roller skates and was frequented by Malcolm X and Langston Hughes. It was opened and owned by an elevator man and later taken over by the basketball player Wilt Chamberlain.\footnote{William Maxwell, \textit{New Negro, Old Left} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 53.}

The central conceit of “A Porter’s Love-Song”—the whole three-and-a-half minute amorous proposition—revolves around the waged troubadour’s invitation to identify as an instrument of labor, and more specifically, as an implement of the menial task of maintenance. No doubt, the whole tune is suffused with an erotics of “work.” If one familiar gendered dynamic of objectification involves a subject producing a woman as a thing to be consumed or disposed of for pleasure, the porter’s invocation seems, somewhat differently, to call upon both parties to enjoy each other’s company as objects. And unlike more familiar tropings that might be included in the standard linguistic repertoire for flirtation on the job, these verses locate the possibility of romantic fulfillment in becoming the un-privileged objects of utility. If there is sexual innuendo in these lines, the physical acts and the erotogenic organization to which they correspond do not seem to be straightforward.

The porter’s call draws the addressee toward a movement opposite that of personification: it is not the inanimate that are suddenly humanized, but the living labor that is wistfully objectified into dustpan, broom, shoe brush, and shoe—a material community, immanent. In convolute B of the \textit{Arcades}, Benjamin proposes that the “vital nerve [\textit{Lebensnerv}]” of fashion is “fetishism that succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic” (GS7 1128-1229; \textit{AP} 8). Buck-Morss glosses his rather opaque
remarks on the attractiveness of the un-living as a double displacement of “nature’s transience,” as well as of intersubjective desire onto the body of the saleable commodity: “sex appeal emanates from the clothes that one wears…. Humanity is what you hang your hat on” (DS 101). It seems that the “Porter’s Love-Song” finds a space between, on the one hand, the improper transference that Buck-Morss describes and, on the other, the mere projection of subjective desire onto the material surroundings (i.e. the sofa sags and splits with her unearthly grief).

Some might be inclined to see this fantasy as the manifestation of a consciousness so alienated, so penetrated by the structure of (self-)commodification, that even in the depths of fantasy, reification is affirmed by personal desire. But only a leaden ear could hear this ragtime summons to **verdinglichung** as an instance of the blues. It is not as if the I is unaware of occupying a “low station,” in which the gaze from others always seems to land from above. An acknowledgement of his status serves as the lyrical frame, which the “poor,” hard rhymes that strike the end of every other line do not seek to conceal.

Another possibility is that, in a society in which no one is untouched by reification, the poet is intent to discover play and romance nonetheless, among the world of things in which he moves. The speaker and addressee are not, in this light, failed or impaired subjects because they have yet to be enlightened out of their dim state of dependence (Kant) or because they are not yet conscious of the historical truth of their own exploitation (Marx). As William Pietz is astute to observe in his writing on fetishism, the work of disillusionment is an operation that both generates value and is invested with the power of “ultimate degradation”—an exposure of delusion that wins truth at the expense of the belief that is appraised as no longer to have any currency. *Je sais bien, mais quand même*: the fetishist knows, sometimes better than the analyst, that recognizing the fetish does not dispel it. What we have, in this dialectic from below, is not the truth of the untruth of the fetish, but a knowledge that subjectivity, as it is stipulated by late capitalism, serves at best as an uneasy aspirational horizon, since it is once affiliated with domination or otherworldliness. The insight of Pietz that—augural—pierces through the hermeneutic of suspicion, is that the truth of disillusionment is hardly a sufficient condition for livability. What animates the “Porter’s Love-Song” is, in short, a refusal to condemn what is reified, doubly, to a life of un-lovability.

Certainly, empathy with the inorganic may warrant ambivalence. But in the final analysis it exceeds any analytic of subjective taste or psychic projection. It involves, rather, the effort to consider social experience under late capitalism, not from the vantage of the enlightened philosopher, but, as it were, from below, from the perspective of the commodified thing—the perspective of someone or something for whom identity with the commodity had become socially objective. Put otherwise, humanity, and its varied incarnations in the structure of legal personhood, is not the emancipatory horizon toward which Benjamin’s thought tends. His commitment, rather, remains with those for whom the statement, “I am a thing to be sold,” cannot be entirely disavowed—those for whom a pronounced differentiation from the the nonhuman is either unachievable or untrue to lived experience. “Empathy with the commodity” names an effort to countenance the experience of the fetish, not from some archimedian point of a disenchanted world, but to imagine a political response to it, while living in its thrall.

Borne through the current of the lyric, empathy with the inorganic moves us toward the question: What resistance, what sociality, what language, what forms of eros, what mourning, and what uneven pulses of experience are possible beside human subjectivity, understood as a self-possession that sets the self over and above what does not take human form?
Kafka’s Allegories of *Aufmerksamkeit*

*Even if Kafka did not pray—and this we do not know—he still possessed in the highest degree what Malebranche called the “natural prayer of the soul”: attentiveness [Aufmerksamkeit]. And in this attentiveness he included all creatures, as saints include them in their prayers.*

—Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death”

(SW 2.2 812; GS 2 432)

The previous chapter followed Benjamin’s dialectical leap from Baroque drama to the period he designates as high capitalism. We found that he conceives of the commodity-form not exclusively as the distorted and obfuscated appearance of congealed human labor but also as a technic of signification that is complicit in the degradation of the object-field. In this way, the subsumption of things to the flatly quantitative dimension price is comparable to seventeenth-century conventions of instilling meaning into things whose availability is historically contingent. The former, however, far surpasses the latter in terms of scale, ambition, and univocality.

In both cases, allegorical signification is comprehended in terms of a potential violence against the object inflicted with meaning from without. Allegory entails an incapacitation of the signified, even though it is through the very ruins of allegory that natural and human history are able to break errantly into perceptibility. Baudelaire, with his allegories of the street, provides Benjamin with a way to think about how a practice of re-signification might splinter the monolingualism of capitalism, by way of destroying the “natural” context of commodities—or what, in Lukácsian terms, would be called “second nature,” a stratum of experience in which exchange-value appears as if inherent in its material bearer. While Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire taps into the pull of identification, which draws consciousness toward the thing-as-commodity instead of repelling the nonhuman other in a movement of differentiation, the Baudelairean expression of empathy with the commodity drifts toward a re-centering in human experience. In other words, empathy with the commodity, despite its opening toward the inorganic, is liable to be taken as a synonym for the quintessential condition of the human laborer, who relates to herself and appears in society largely as the incarnation of a thing (labor-power) to be exchanged.

Empathy with the inorganic, however, has dimensions that cannot be re-inscribed as a momentary lapse within an otherwise coherent rubric of alienated human consciousness. Although the *flâneur* is singled out as a virtuoso of empathy—which is to say, although Baudelaire’s vision of modernity supplies the scaffolding for Benjamin’s exploration of mimetic relations with the commodified—it is through Kafka’s parables that the problematic of empathy is more radically dislodged from the gravitational center of the human subject. Benjamin’s willingness to consider capitalism as it is refracted through Baudelairean states of intoxication certainly loosens the theoretical commitment to the uptight and tucked-in subject of autonomy and reason. Even so, the human subject, whether
dazed or called into sobriety, remains the discursive anchor of Baudelaire’s texts in a way that certain of Kafka’s parables unsettle, leaving behind as they sometimes do, any semblance of the anthropos as the organizing principle of experience.

Through Kafka’s work, the problematic of allegory is able to be penetrated by a question that we have yet to ask fully: not whether one can, with the panache of vain heroism, out-allegorize capital, as it were but, rather, how objects that have already been subject to the protocols of allegory—that is, how everyone and everything that bears the imprint of commodification or securitization—might, in Benjamin’s words, be able to “emanate” their own meaning once more. Put otherwise, if capitalism rules over and degrades elements in the object-field by forcing their significance to coincide with the monetary value assigned to them, how can their disabled capacity to issue their own significance be recuperated—especially if they initially enter the world as commodities and never had access to the unimpeded exercise of such a capacity in the first place.

There is, in short, no originary state, free of violence, to be restored—no primary emanation that was not already under threat of being muted by the force of allegory. The prefix of ausstrahlen helps attune this inquiry to the directionality that Benjamin envisions. Can the meaning that “beams out” from the nonhuman rather than that which is cast into it make an appearance in language—or, even, in the image that is technologically mediated? Could significance issue forth from the object and into the perceptibility of writing without lapsing into yet another allegory, which would drive what radiates outward back into the object, to be lodged within it, as the object’s apparently intrinsic meaning? Or, is the prospect of the object’s emanation foreclosed by the conviction that to speak of living presence radiating through a text is nothing more than an ontotheological conceit?

In addition to bringing to light a ligature that binds allegoresis to the nonhuman in a way that differs from Baudelairean empathy, which remains still susceptible to anthroponarcissitic closure, these reflections on Kafka return us differently to one of the principal aims of the dissertation: namely, to imagine ways to consider the nonhuman apart from, but certainly not immune to, the potent but nevertheless limited framework of sovereign decision. In the introduction I drew attention to Agamben’s analysis of how the political is delimited by an exercise of sovereign intervention, whereby a constituted power (king, author) stipulates a hiatus between human and nonhuman forms of life. Once articulated, these biological caesuras can readily become the basis for biopolitical regulation. I proposed a theoretical reorientation that would take some distance from such frameworks—common within the turn to the nonhuman in the humanities, as well as in animal and environmental rights discourse—which focus, if not exclusively then primarily, on sovereignty’s exercise: the scene in which the (individual or collective) human—already presumed to have the power to make a thanatopolitical determination—deliberates and decides whom to let live and make die, and in keeping with the inversion that biopower precipitates, whom to let die and make live.

Certainly, this process of producing the human through the articulation of (racialized) divisions among forms of life—including the border between animal and human that is internalized as a structure of subjective formation—discloses one part of the broad picture of how partitioning the ontological field is a foundational act through which political subjection often operates most potently, most soundlessly. And though such an analytic of sovereignty may be able to gain insight into how the division between the elevated anthropos and debased nonhuman ultimately unravels in the face of its own anxious re-articulation, such a view fails to give an account—ethically, phenomenologically, politically, structurally—of the side of the non-sovereign: that which does not always accede to human form; those variably under exposure to the sentence of the human other;
and those that may not have the power or the discursive resources of legitimized fantasy to decide
where the limits of protected (political) human life should be drawn (for instance, as Linnaeus does
with science and Aristotle and Heidegger do with philosophy).

Shifting attention from the thing-commodity distinction, which proved essential for Benjamin’s
rehabilitation of a tradition of philosophical Marxism that had succumbed to anthroponarcissism,
this chapter considers the encounters with animals and uncategorizable beings that are occasioned
by Kafka’s writing. His fiction, which in a way, is a foil to Schmittian decisionism, lends itself to the
other side of sovereignty’s exercise—that is, not to the moment of productive power in which the
human declares itself as exception (as the only one with reason, with language, with a world) but to
scenes in which such distinctions are discomposed, as well as to the less frequently narrated, in the
context of modern fiction, lived experience of what does not maintain itself in human form. Indeed,
Kafka’s stories are preoccupied with the fragility and often astonishing contingency of the divide
between human and nonhuman—not only as a conceptual insight pertaining to the often uncanny
supplementarity of what is sloughed off from the essence of humanitas and makes its return in the
form of a haunting, but also through the narration of the experience of one who passes into and out
of human shape without ever being able fully to stabilize existence on either side of the caesura.
The nonhuman that speaks and avails itself of human language is, as it was for Benjamin, paramount
for Kafka’s deviation from the rigidity of species-being, species-belonging. One might regard his
penchant for generating ontological indeterminacy as an expression of resistance to the taxonomic
impulse that underwrites what Agamben calls the “anthropological machine.”

Looking toward Kafka’s body of fictional work, one might also call to mind some of the famous and
more minor appearances of those whose ontological identity cannot be kept straight: the eponymous
“Kreuzung,” which is “half kitten, half lamb” and, as we learn at the story’s end, might possibly
harbor the “ambitions of a human being”; Rotpeter the ape, whose disenchanted autobiographical
report recounts his ambivalent transition from animal life into European civil society; and Gregor,
who, once he awakes differently embodied, still retains the psycho-linguistic organization of his
earlier days. Notably, Kafka often writes of nonhumans whose mere appearance seems to raise, very
quickly, the question of whether they shall be permitted to live (in freedom). He narrates the
perspective of those for whom “to be” seems inextricable from being subject to captivity or death at
the hands of humanity, while also insisting that the experience of the nonhuman is not fully
exhausted by this exposure to violence, which is the sometimes unliveable condition of their
continued existence.

And even though in Kafka’s worlds there is no full escape from subjection to the human—the cat-
lamb is marked, in the very first line of the story, as a possession belonging to the first-person
narrator who contemplates its slaughter—Kafka’s transients, his shapeshifters, and all those non-
sovereigns for whom the questions “what is it? where is it from?” cannot be answered finally,
frustrate the inscription of the nonhuman within the framework of political decisionism.

With Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire freshly in view, one might be better poised to see how, in
Kafka’s work, allegory exceeds the plane of formalism and is implicated in a larger effort to resist the
anthroponarcissic closure effected by figural practices of signification. Kafka’s frustrated allegories
have been variously associated with the inaccessibility of the theological and, more specifically, of
Judaic law (Derrida) or, as Benjamin suggests, of a Haggadah that “raises a mighty paw” against the

Halakha from which it has been sundered; the irretrievability of the historical past, despite the persistence of damaged fragments that point, incompletely, toward devastation; the debilitating juridico-political structures of a totally administered society; and the inability to see psychosexual desire through to its fulfillment. This chapter suggests, somewhat differently, that Kafka’s allegories call into question the anthropic domination of the nonhuman world—not only diegetically, in depicting the vulnerability of nonhuman bodies, but also by partially disabling a literary form that traditionally operates with the presumption that the object-field lies at the disposal of human productive, signifying activity. If Baudelaire allegorizes furiously, in order to wrest things free from capture by the law of price, Kafka, I am arguing, turns allegory into an occasion for Aufmerksamkeit, a version of self-forgetting, which marks an “attentiveness” toward the nonhuman. Such a practice countermands allegorical production’s inclination toward instrumentalizing animals, creatures, and objects, with the end of signifying some higher order of significance, proper to the anthropic or mythic world.

I. On Reading Kafka’s Animals

It is well known that the Kafkaan bestiary is among the most formidably populated. Many of his most memorable protagonists are those who have gone irrevocably and involuntarily adrift from their own species-being. Sometimes, this process is described as an irresistible, almost impersonal force that draws someone out, from the periphery to the exterior of the Volkskreis. In many cases, this deviance is scarcely survivable—or is endured, only at great cost. And, at the same time, those inhuman lives that sometimes become somewhat impossible to live contain the promise that the dominance of “species” as an organizing principle—and the very notion of a biological caesura, which is, as Foucault notes, the discursive basis for racism—might some day be overcome.

The canonicity of “The Metamorphosis” has contributed to the impression that Kafka’s animals are functionaries in an allegory about the dehumanizing effects of a modernity made even more brutal by the violence of bureaucratic organization. But this is only part of the story, of course, as other tales narrate the reverse trajectory, the process of the animal acceding to humanity. From the perspective of Rotpeter the chimpanzee, whose life achievement has been to “reach the cultural level of an average European,” humanization is less a progressive path to acculturation than a mechanism of survival, one comprised of tactical imitation—an aping, if you will—of human behavior, admixed with a profound forgetting of his past life in captivity. As one sees in “A Report to an Academy,” Kafka’s penchant for ceding narration to extra-human inferiorities allows for the bildung among other narrative forms implicated in the concept of progress, to be bestialized. His fictional worlds are those in which the abstract categories of humanity and animality—often dubiously claimed to be founded on a biological distinction—are shown to be remarkably porous. Humanity is never fully accomplished without the possibility of relapsing into an animal existence that, in the name of civilization, had to be disavowed in order to become human. Kafka’s literature, then, is just as much one of subject-formation as it is of de-subjectivation.

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The overpopulation of Kafka’s pages with inhuman actors—singing mice, scribbling burrows, talking cats, leopards breaking into the temple, monstrous vermin, who formerly worked as traveling salesmen, primates with a lecture series, tigers on exhibit who do nothing but yawn, conspiring jackals, dogs who devote their lives to research, other, musical dogs who walk on their hind legs, only to tumble back down periodically onto four—is a negative image of the absence, the deportation and extermination of nonhuman species, which was necessary for constituting urban space according to the law of maximal profit and ground rent. At the same time, the sequence reads like an inventory of a virtuosic circus menagerie—of the very kind that detracts attention from the hunger artist, whom the disaffected crowds pass by on the way to see the other animals on display. For the captive ape who does not wish to die, there are, as Rotpeter informs the academy, only two alternatives: the variety show or the zoo (E, 209; C 257). Although Kafka’s stories seem often abstracted from any milieu that can be dated with precision, something of the historical moment is disclosed in the knowledge that the creature confronts the vast challenge of survival more narrowly as a problem of survival within a human society with which its free existence is at odds. An animal like him, he knows, could only be integrated—that is, be permitted to live in a state of proximal estrangement—as an entertainer or as an incarcerated body.

What would it be to practice attentiveness toward such equivocal beings, bereft of personhood and at variance with those philosophical traditions that work toward stiffening the partition between human and animal? Initially, one might be inclined to regard Aufmerksamkeit as something of a generalized virtue, lodged in the character of the human, moral subject. Ultimately, I will suggest that the attentiveness to the nonhuman that Kafka’s work invites has an extra-subjective aspect, as well as a distinctly literary one. But in order for Aufmerksamkeit to come into view in the fullness of its many dimensions, it may first be necessary to set this quality in relief from two prominent positions that are adopted with respect to Kafka’s animals: namely, that they be read allegorically for their pointed expression of the disquieting and regressive aspects of secular, European modernity or regarded as a part of a literature committed to creatural literality.

Kafka’s work, one might say, harbors two conflicting aspects that are epitomized by the sentiments “never will I arrive” and “Hello, I am here (improbably addressing you).” Each hangs before the other, as the other’s pendant. And they both swing the direction of interpretation into seemingly distant regions: one in which, as allegory, the struggles of the animal body are rarefied into a object-lesson about how people experience modern alienation as dehumanizing in the extreme, and accordingly, such experience can only be represented through a dreadfully emblematic image; and the other in which, as forsaken parables of subsistence, Kafka’s inhuman tales—their influence by the theological and folk traditions notwithstanding—maintain themselves steadfastly in a kind of literal footing with creatures, whose existence has no more significance than the daily cares, the living-on, that they manifest. These possibilities, of course, do not comprise a true and moribund antithesis. Rather, they are the two handles to which Kafka holds fast, in order to bring about the reversals whose often vertiginous effect generates the lasting irresolution, which some have identified as paradox. Ultimately, these interpretive categories will no doubt fall away, much as the opposition between immanence and transcendence shows itself untenable in the face of Kafka’s topographies, which are indeed other-wordly, and yet, at the very same time, somehow too much of this world. This temporary distillation may nonetheless help us to recognize certain readerly inclinations that Kafka’s work solicits.

The first path—more familiar and perhaps requiring less explication—is taken up by all those readers whom, in “Against Interpretation,” Susan Sontag indicts with the “philistine refusal to leave
the work of art alone.” 4 In brief, she stages a resistance against critics—equipped with the penetrating vision of a psychoanalytic, political, or theological optic—who read Kafka’s texts as an allegory of paternal fear and castration anxiety; of bureaucracy and totalitarianism; of heavenly refusal and divine justice. She simplifies, of course. But she does, interestingly, take issue with depth-oriented hermeneutics (exemplified by Freud and Marx) by reading such practices as symptomatic—not of paranoia, as Sedgwick suggests, but of an aggression toward appearances. Considering how this hostility might play out in Kafka’s parables specifically, we may keep in mind the following as an open question: to what extent does the insistence on the allegorical significance of Kafka’s bestiary manifest, not a generalized aggression or desire to look away from the phenomenal, but a more pointed intolerance of the appearance of inhuman corporeality? At the other end of the spectrum lies the effort to read Kafka’s parables as a testament to the facticity of creaturely existence. Eric Santner, among others, has constructed a genealogy of the Kreatur—a concept with origins in early modern theology, subsequently adapted by Rilke and Heidegger, which refers to lowly lifeforms that are radically subject to a politico-theological authority modeled on the Creator. Santner makes clear that creaturely life pertains, in his study, to a “specifically human way” in which “bodies and psyches register the ‘states of exception’” that puncture the “normal” states of political life. 5 His analysis ultimately re-inscribes the creaturely within the parameters of the anthropos—a circumscription that, I am arguing, Kafka’s animal parables perforate and in various ways seek to forget.

One finds an exemplary instance of a decidedly non-allegorical engagement with Kafka’s creatures in Deleuze and Guattari’s avidity for “becoming-animal” as an “absolute deterritorialization”—a “movement” that offers a radical exit from the Oedipal grid (the dog is no longer a substitute for the father!) and gives rise to a total unbinding from the order of signification:

To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs. Kafka’s animals never refer to a mythology or to archetypes but correspond solely to new levels, zones of liberated intensities where contents free themselves from their forms as well as from their expressions, from the signifier that formalized them. There is no longer anything but movements, vibrations, thresholds in a deserted matter…. Gregor becomes a cockroach not to flee his father but rather to find an escape where his father didn’t know to find one, in order to flee the director, the business, and the bureaucrats, to reach that region where the voice no longer does anything but hum. 6

It is not easy to square this vision of a Heraclitean break-out with the knowledge that to be inhuman in Kafka’s worlds is so often shot through with the premonition, memory, or lived experience of captivity. It is true that Gregor wins relief from his job, but he never breaks out of the context of

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4 Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation: And Other Essays (New York: Macmillan, 2013), 8.
6 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, 13.
economic circulation, in which, as David Harvey suggests, pathology is defined as the inability to go to work.⁷ Had Gregor had enough wealth, or enough potential to generate surplus value, he likely would have been able to make his body habitable; he would have been less resented for being a parasitic roommate, unable to pay his share. Still understood, and still thinking of himself as a non-productive member of the oikos, he gradually is regarded as a stain on the private. His mere appearance invites retaliation, retching.

One may query, too, the generality of Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology: Gregor’s is not a case of becoming-animal, but a becoming-Ungeziefer—that is, a turning more specifically into vermin, an appellation whose etymology marks him as being unfit for sacrifice (i.e. his death cannot be given any special meaning, cannot generate value in a symbolic economy). The cost of this metamorphosis is imprisonment in a room he cannot leave without risking injury—especially from the father, who is the first to weaponize the items of the household: a stick becomes truncheon, an apple becomes a lethal projectile, lodged into a back that is ineligible for healthcare.

Kafka narrates, in the early moments of Gregor’s waking, what Benjamin might have described as a passage from human-languages to those that are dumb: the story is a translation-through-metamorphosis, or better, translation as lived experience. Gregor does drift toward a region where his “voice no longer does anything but hum” (ML 13). But this escape, which is hardly a voluntary passage to emancipation, is also experienced as an exile. It seems that Gregor’s cognitive and affective constitution remain astonishingly intact, even though he no longer has the vocal apparatus to externalize what he wishes. His expression, it seems, cannot be received; and, conversely, people stop addressing him directly in the second person. Even the slightest of his gestures is liable to be misrecognized as an attack—and so, for much of the time, his only successful communication is non-communication—a form of solicitude that is only achieved by making himself scarce. Despite this prolonged and perhaps irreversible case of laryngitis, he remains attached, pressing himself against the wall, in order to eavesdrop on human speech.

To portray Gregor’s condition as pure deterritorialization seems to miss the ways in which he remains cathected to a structure of kinship that gradually seeks to un-initiate him from a prior state of belonging. Gregor, even while effectively ejected from the economy of human value, feels himself to be legible as someone with no earning potential.

The purpose of this brief counter-reading is not to insist that there is, hard and true, no exit from the totalizing forces of capitalist modernity that organize family, work, species, and subsistence so that bodies without (re)productive capacities are met with violence. Forces of determination are not tantamount to identity. The pathos for Gregor as an alienated subject, incapable of expressing himself to the family members that are closest to him, might, in the context of certain “new” materialisms, be seen as little more than an intransigent humanism, which falsely re-inscribes his condition into anthropic parameters of value and relationality. The evocation of brute materiality that does not coalesce into a notion—that is, the positing of becoming-animal as a crossing over of a threshold beyond which one finds a “continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves”—is no less a conceptual fabrication than Oedipus, the most archetypal archetypes (ML 13). In the broader context of my argument, Deleuze and Guattari are less a target in themselves than an occasion for bringing into view habits of thought that continue to be transmitted

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⁷ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (University of California Press, 2000), 106.
by theoretical discourses of the nonhuman—particularly those that seek to bypass or resist the modern critical tradition, conventionally thought to begin with Kant.

Becoming-animal, in their usage, should be distinguished from a bestialization that is an exercise of power—a turning of someone into a subhuman that remains locked into circuit of subjection. They suggest, rather, a process of transport, which leads to a flux, a continuum in which there is no “longer anything but movements, vibrations, thresholds in a deserted matter” (ML 13). In other words, this a state in which determinate negation is not performed, cannot generate meaning; here, in this plane of immanence, is a fluctuation that is sheer unbinding from form—aesthetic, semantic, political, psychic, all of it; matter sways, trembles, into reverberation, but remains, no matter how intense, unshaped by signification, and does not coalesce into expression.

The salient objection is not that such a view fails to represent the operations of the existing world and only seems to disassociate itself from it (the realist argument). It is, rather, that three implicit claims, which in spite of the promised disarray of the deterritorialized flux, siphon themselves off from this rhetoric to produce a rather consistent schema of the nonhuman. First, becoming-animal—conceived, interestingly, as a crossing over, which seems to require at least some rudimentary deictic sense of a here that is differentiated from a there, beyond the threshold—is identified as a zone of value “in itself.”8 Second, without a clear reason—and to be sure, one might retort that what is at stake is precisely an existence that is other to any order of justification—animals are located outside signification. Or, more accurately, becoming-animal is the nebulous, a-intentional dissipation of structures, bundles, images, even semes of meaning. Very close, and at times apparently indistinguishable from this supposition of the non-signifying is, thirdly, an appearance of this quasi-category of “matter”—not just any matter but matter that is “deserted,” “unformed,” and elsewhere, when speaking of Kafka’s musical inclinations, described as a “pure and intense sonorous material that is always connected to its own abolition” (ML 13, 6). These three elements come together in an impression, not of a vacuum, but a plenitude of intensities that, even while they may be annexed back into the territory of “Oedipal impasse,” are in themselves indifferent to and apart from human meaning.

What we have before us, under the sign of deterritorialization—which points ostensibly to a break, a dash for liberation—is none other than a rather conventional portrait of animal existence. In this depiction of becoming-animal as an entry into a state of zero-surplus, the skeletons of Marx’s bee and Descartes’s machines raise themselves up. That is, a species differentiation is articulated along the lines of an imagined inarticulacy, along a zone of production believed to be without signification or reserve. “What distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees,” Marx writes in his chapter on the labor process, is “that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality” (C 284). The insect builds, and may build beautifully, but because there is no prior and proleptic process of symbolization—because what it does remains foreign to the temporal structure of planning—it’s labor will not be conceptualized as labor, but only as sheer exertion, whose meaning is immanent to process. The bee performs activity that does not consummate a distinct, imagined purpose, but exhausts itself in its own doing. Similarly, the noises of Deleuze and Guattari’s animals remain sub-lingual, or a-lingual. The hum does not split off into a signified that transcends it, but says only itself. It is true that they think of Kafka’s animals less as a unified

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8 This is precisely the opposite of Spivak’s definition of labor as that which is super-adequate to itself and has the power to generate more than what it is, in the form of surplus. See Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value, Diacritics 15, no. 4 (Winter 1985), 73.
substrate of being than as machines—or, in their words, as clustered proximities of independent terms that do not have a center of gravity. Yet something of this characterization doubles back on the muster conception of the animal as machine that, by way of Descartes’s suggestion that nonhumans are capable of only reflex action, helped to inaugurate the modern episteme in the direction of human exceptionalism.

It would not be accurate to suggest that becoming-animal regresses fully into a static production of the animal as other to the anthropos: mechanical, dumb, unable to found an economy, which requires a realm that is semi-autonomous from matter—a realm in which significations of value and imagined designs circulate, somewhat apart from the contingencies of their realization. Even so, the question still remains why the “animal”—even when de-substantialized into the freneticism of sheer intensities—has to be imagined as the degree zero of signification. Deleuze and Guattari by no means posit outright an ontological division between human and animal that hinges on a deficiency or capacity for language, as some philosophical accounts do. Nor do they strive to produce the singularity of the human by excluding everything without ratio. Although becoming-animal is inflected with a revolutionary current, one may wonder: doesn’t this vision of escape into the unformed, pure noise of movement, which generates no additional semantic value, constitute the human world as the exclusive realm of speech? Is there not some violence in the pre-determination of what it is to become animal as a trespass into dumbness? Or, if not dumbness, then an elision between a slightness of signification and non-signification? And is there not an additional violence in depicting that theoretical and arguably imposed condition of muteness as an escape from an entrapment by human institutions? Is becoming-animal not simply rendered as the fantasized other side, the shadow cast by a human monopoly on the powers of signification—a consolidation that remains essentially unchallenged? Is this liberation not merely a deepening of the groove carved by anthropo-narcissistic thought, which sees the absence of human meaning as no meaning at all?

Where their interpretation of Kafka is most forceful is not in the partial radicalization of animality, but in their articulation of a desire to refuse the fixity of submission and dominance as a closed circuit, in which the dominated can only remain so, or retaliate in a way that reproduces, albeit with a difference, the domination that has already been inflicted. At times, they imagine that the transformation out of human form offers an alternative to one’s compromised position within systems of oppression—even if one serves only as a functionary. “To the inhumaness of the ‘diabolical powers’ [of technocracy and Fascism], there is the answer of a becoming-animal: to become a beetle, to become a dog, to become an ape…rather than lowering one’s head and remaining a bureaucrat, inspector, judge, or judged” (ML. 12). It is uncertain to what extent such a response could be deliberately sought out, or be accurately thought of, in terms of a politics of refusal. What they imagine is something that becomes a fugitive from the juridico-moral economy of guilt, complicity, and punishment—something that cannot be reckoned as a lapse, resistance, or fulfillment of duty, since becoming-animal is removed from the whole nexus of human accountability. Becoming-inhuman is to defect in a way that cannot be recorded as conscientious objection, nor even as a more minimal statement of disinclination, as in Bartleby’s refrain of reticence, “I would prefer not to.” To reiterate, in their words, what is at stake: becoming-animal “isn’t a question of liberty as against submission, but only a question of a line of escape or, rather, of a simple way out, as little signifying as possible” (6).

It does seem worthwhile to explore the un-programmatic potential for finding release from the norms of human form and formalization. It seems, too, that their reading of Kafka raises vital questions about fleeting gestures that do not consolidate into a clear strategy of praxis; movements
that elude a radar tuned in exclusively into monumental acts; exertions that unbind from, rather than directly rail against, structures of power. Such temporary rushes toward refuge are not to be underestimated, especially as a tactic taken up by the disempowered. But there is nonetheless something objectionable about the premium Deleuze and Guattari place on drawing as closely as possible to the asymptotic limit of non-signification. “Matter” comes to stand in for and to name the incarnation of a liberated zone that is devoid of signification. And this imagined “other side,” this fantasy of what is beyond the threshold, is superimposed onto the experience of becoming-animal. This vision of an exit is little more than the negative image of Lacan’s assertion that to become a human subject is to make an entrance into the order of the symbolic.\(^9\) Despite the rhetoric of kinetic excitement and flux, they reify the inhuman as the place in which there is no expression, only sound; no signification, only noise. Short of dictating the terms of a transvaluation, they imply that brute sonic intensities without meaning need not be judged pejoratively, or seen as deficient in comparison to the semantic richness of the human utterance. Even so, their characterization—and I use this term in the literary sense—of becoming-animal as pure kinesis works to consolidate the powers of the human.

Considered more restrictively in terms of an interpretation of Kafka’s parables, their account of becoming-animal as a passage into non-signification is difficult to swallow—especially, in light of the signature lucidity and garrulousness of his animal and invertebrate kingdoms. Kafka’s creatures often speak to us in an astonishingly pellucid German—not in Czech, or through an invented script or convention of typography that, like Joyce’s disintegrating letters and fragmented syntax, gives the impression of opacity or a resistance of what is represented to the representation itself. Clear as day, we hear the direct address of those who are ordinarily believed to without speech. “Honored members of the Academy! You have done me the honor of inviting me to give your Academy an account of the life I formerly led as an ape”: this is the implausible address with which one of Kafka’s stories begins, and subsequently draws us further into hearing out the speech of the captive body commodity, without breaking the latter’s spell, as Marx is rather eager to do in order to drive his lesson home (C 251). And while Gregor’s transformation makes him unable to communicate verbally with his kin, the narration does not ally itself with those with the power of linguistic expression, but rather remains, through the third person, in close company with Gregor’s consciousness, which cannot be said to be wholly transparent, but is rendered with unusual clarity.

The introduction of improbable fluency into inter-species communication—a gesture that is repeated throughout Kafka’s work—is less a strong demand for the reader to suspend disbelief, than a glimpse of a reconciliation of human and natural history that is woven into an apprehension of just how far such reconciliation is from being realized. The eloquence of the creaturely in Kafka flouts the legitimacy of any species distinction that is premised on establishing the human as singularly endowed with the faculty of language.

Deleuze and Guattari may be regarded as one of the more apparently radical rivulets in a broader and much older current within Western thought, which both presumes and solidifies the affiliation of the inhuman with non-signification. There are, indeed, distinct variations in the way this assumption continues to manifest in the twentieth century, ranging from Cassirer’s explicit definition of the human as *animal symbolikon* to Lacan’s more circuitous proposition that animals are incapable of double deception—the ability to pretend to pretend—which is the very duplicity that constitutes

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human speech. Against such a philosophical backdrop, which, as Kelly Oliver suggests, is characterized conceptually by the “sacrifice” of the animal to the notion of man, as well as by the “double movement” of assimilating and subsequently disavowing the animal, Kafka and Benjamin’s effort to break open language from its anthropic circumscription stand out rather dramatically.\(^\text{11}\)

Certainly, some would argue that Benjamin’s contention that all entities partake of language merely harkens back to an older episteme, in which the natural world was conceived as a form of divine prose that could be read. Others might appraise his understanding of language as a conservative relapse into a theological logoscentrism, in which the notion that divine presence reveals itself through the word is extended not only to conjure the subject out of the inanimate debris of graphic marks, but also to call into being nonhuman presences as if they, too, stood, in all their realness, behind written language. Benjamin’s account, in other words, might be dismissed on the grounds of its vulnerability to hermeneutic practices of deconstruction, which demonstrate the death of the subject and show more generally that, whenever a bid to presence is made through writing, there is effectively no there there. As mentioned before, Benjamin’s work introduces the possibility of reversing the question, so as to ask whether there might be a (bourgeois) conception of language that underpins and delimits the way in which something like a deconstructive critique could unfold.

II.

I would like now to chart an itinerary that diverges from a notion of the inhuman as non-signifying and seeks rather to contend with this condition as one that is contingently produced by a history of domination, in which language plays a part. Recall that Benjamin offers a somewhat idiosyncratic account of allegory, one which neither privileges the arrival at a higher plane of meaning nor assumes the vantage of the allegorist, so as to understand what may be at work in his craft. Shifting attention away from content—that is, from the question of what a particular allegory ultimately means or what lesson it might offer—he considers what happens to the materials that are instrumentalized in the process of signification. Benjamin understands this literary phenomenon as effecting, first and foremost, a transformation in the object-field. To cite once more his portrayal of the metamorphosis in question: Once allegory descends upon the world of things, “the object itself is henceforth incapable of emanating [ausstrahlen] any meaning, any significance of its own” (GS I 359, O 184).

Both ausstrahlen and Aufmerksamkeit appear in Benjamin’s discussion of aura, which, as I argued, is one of the channels through which he insists, against Adorno, that the animacy of things is irreducible to the unremembered human labor that has been instilled in it. One may note, here, the latent parallel being forged between commodities and the objects employed in allegorical signification—the jackal, the spoon, the turtle—which exceed what authorial intention is able to introduce into them. In the essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Aufmerksamkeit appears in the context of a citation: “‘Perceptibility [Die Warnehmbarkeit],’ as Novalis puts it, ‘is an attentiveness’ (GS I.1 646; SW # 338). Benjamin goes on to propose, adding a third and then fourth term to the pair that the already mystically compact aphorism joins with a copula, that perceptibility (which is

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\(^{10}\) Ernst Cassirer, An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture (Yale University Press, 1972), 27.


\(^{11}\) Kelly Oliver, Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human (Columbia University Press, 2009), 4.
attentiveness) is none other than aura, which in turn he glosses as the investment of inorganic or natural objects with the ability to reciprocate the gaze. Taking a cue from this late essay, we might, in returning to this chapter’s epigraph, hear that when Benjamin attributes to Kafka Aufmerksamkeit that would not turn away from any creature, he is signaling, too, that such sensitivity is to be thought of in conjunction with the perhaps unexpected ways in which the nonhuman radiates something, from its side, to meet perception. If we permit a synesthetic translation, we can consider, not only how the nonhuman surprisingly meets eyes with an implicitly human observer, but also, as it were, may be found to speak back to a linguistic address.

Coming close to expressing a more radical version of the “primacy of the object” for which Adorno would later advocate in Negative Dialectics, Benjamin’s commentary on Novalis makes an effort to decenter Aufmerksamkeit from the gravitational pull of the observing subject. Benjamin cites Novalis’s compact formulation in an earlier text, “The Concept of Criticism,” in the course of his reflections on how the German Romantics did not regard thinking as something exclusively undertaken by an “I” that stands opposed, as in the Fichtean account, to nature. In the dissertation he completed in 1919, Benjamin glosses the Novalis maxim that reappears, newly charged and luminous with anachronism, in his 1939 essay about aura and the agitated calm with which Baudelaire responded to the disturbances of industrial capital:

Diese Bedingtheit jeder Objekterkenntnis in einer Selbsterkenntnis des Objekts zu behaupten, ist Novalis nicht müde geworden. In der paradoxesten, zugleich hellsten Gestalt in dem kurzen Satz: »die Wahrnehmbarkeit eine Aufmerksamkeit«. Ob in diesem Satz über die Aufmerksamkeit des Gegenstandes auf sich selbst hinaus noch die auf den Wahrnehmenden gemeint ist, tut nichts zur Sache; denn selbst wenn er diesen Gedanken deutlich ausspricht: »In allen Prädiskaten, in denen wir das Fossil sehen, sieht es uns«, kann doch jene Aufmerksamkeit auf den Sehenden sinngemäß nur als Symptom für die Fähigkeit des Dinges, sich selbst zu sehen, verstanden werden. (GS 1.1, 55-56)

[Novalis never tired of affirming … [the] dependence of any knowledge of an object on self-knowledge by the object. He puts this in the most paradoxical and at the same time clearest form with the short proposition, “Perceptibility [is] an attentiveness.” It does not matter whether in this sentence, over and above the attentiveness of the object to itself, its attentiveness to the one perceiving is also meant; for even when Novalis clearly expresses this thought—“In all predicates in which we see the fossil, it sees us”—that attentiveness to the one seeing can still be rightly understood only as a symptom of the thing’s capacity to see itself.] (SWI 145)

Across the long span, more than two decades, that lies suspended between these repeated citations, one catches a glimpse of the pendulum of Benjamin’s thought, moved by time, to and fro, between two abiding convictions: first, that the question of perceptibility is unequivocally central to philosophy, and second, that perception (and aesthetics) cannot be permitted to backslide into a matter of subjective apprehension. Appropriately, Novalis’s speculative sentence contains no actors—only the nominalization of verbs. In a reversal of the epistemic paradigm in which the (active) subject lays hold of the (passive) object in an act of grasping that constitutes knowledge—a reversal that is reminiscent of the Umkehr of Kafka’s parables—the object of the beholder’s attention becomes an unexpected protagonist. If predicating something about a fossil—
saying something about its contours, its provenance, its composition, the way its ochre pierces through the stolid now of the afternoon—allows something of the specimen to come into view, such a vision always remains contingent, radically so, on what the object reveals of itself in meeting “our” attention. Perhaps surprisingly, one learns that the attentiveness of which Novalis speaks is not primarily, or even at all, an effort of concentration taken up by the observer. On the contrary, attention, which one should note, is not necessarily cognitive, entails the activation of a capacity to become perceptible on the part of the thing observed. Knowledge, strikingly, is entirely eccentric to the subject.

The reciprocity of the gaze envisioned here is far from the Sartrean or Lacanian dramas of the visual field, which narrate how seeing oneself being seen constitutes the subject (in a moment of shame: oh, I have been found out by the gaze of the other (the sardine can!)). If, in the latter, being beheld by an externality is what draws the disparities of me into an I, Benjamin suggests via Novalis, something quite different: the question of subjective constitution is, in a word, beside the point; and the inhuman gaze is not recuperated into the expanded economy of self-recognition that culminates in an identity that will never be in full possession of itself. Instead, Benjamin raises to a higher power the relatively safe, dialectical claim about the subject’s dependence on the object—one which always risks, against its indispensable truth, fading into a platitude. In doing so, he verges on but stops just a hair short of loosening the scene of knowledge from any tie to the human observer whatsoever. In the final turn of this commentary, he maintains that what the (natural) object gives to us in its perceptibility—its attentiveness—is merely a “symptom” of what it already perceives of itself. We discover, then, that what is called “self-knowledge” does not necessarily pertain to the human subject at all.

Does “self-knowledge by the object” mark the phosphorescent frontier beyond which philosophy can go no further? Does the phrase contract itself into a kernel that thought cannot penetrate without submitting to positivism, magic, ekstasis, or the itinerancy of metaphysical curiosity? Does the primacy of what the object is able to make out of itself offer a vision of the object, encased in a self-sufficiency that is little more than the displaced image of the closed circuitry of the reflexive structure of self-consciousness?

It is certainly possible to conjure out of Novalis’s phrase the specter of the unyielding inaccessibility of the noumenal—the splinter lodged deep in idealist philosophy, the memory of which persists, even when attempts are made to absorb such a foreign body into the workings of system. But perhaps what we encounter here is not necessarily a hard limit of cognition that asks to be traversed in the tragicomic arc of a subject who must come to terms with what she does not know. To clarify: Benjamin is not excising the subject or consigning it death, so much as he is encouraging us not to abide in the fantasy of its indispensability.

It is of no small consequence that by the middle of the passage quoted above, what we have before us is a fossil, a ruin of natural history, a relic of ephemerality that exceeds the present and nevertheless helps to constitute its fullness. When in 1939, Novalis reappears as the incomplete, yet guiding cipher for Benjamin’s billowing definition of aura, the fossil—the object in question—is implicitly understood to have transformed into a commodity, which idiosyncratically Benjamin insisted on reading as if it were a fossil, with its own passing into and out of life, ultimately irreducible to anthropic determination. Given that few among him would ever dispute that commodities, first and foremost, were to be understood as products of (exploited) human labor, this position, to say the least, was not always easy to maintain. He nevertheless did and, drawing from
from the uncomely grace of juxtaposition, drew forward the Romantic insight about the utter dependence on the natural world into the context of late capitalist modernity, in which the stakes of such a claim were elevated in direct proportion to the degree to which “nature” could increasingly only appear under the sign of erasure.

To return now to the pause required by the “self-knowledge of the object”: perhaps this object looked upon—natural, commodified, or both—need not be immediately re-written as a thing in itself. Without being clouded over by the problematic of the object’s impenetrability by subjective knowledge, attentiveness to the memento of what exceeds us may open onto something other than the dialectic of felt debility and triumph in which brutality is relentlessly inscribed, despite its many permutations. As in an eclipse, the philosophical attachment to the repetition-through-reversal involved in such schemata of reasoned violence casts into shadow the uncounted ways of meeting the (nonhuman, aesthetic) object otherwise: were one to imagine—impossibly, because against the course of the world—some reprieve from the subjective domination of the object, a partial light might begin to fall, here and there, spotted, on the forgotten potential for astonishment in transience, or even for some inarticulable tenderness, whose repleteness, though unknown to us now, may be yet to come.

Poised on the delicate border between a mode of concentrated (aesthetic) perception and a reception of what the nonhuman offers, “Aufmerksamkeit for all creatures” finds its expression in Kafka’s literature—not only thematically, in his treatment of the full diversity of lived experience, including even that of vermin, but also formally, in that his stories are often focalized or directly narrated by those who do not take human form. This preoccupation with the creaturely stands out against the relative paucity of animals—empirically, as a result of species decline precipitated by modernization, but also within the context of literatures of European modernism, which exhibit a tendency to range in more closely on human interiority, leaving behind, among other practices, nineteenth-century traditions of animal symbolism. But beyond narratorial perspective, motif, and one might add, the sheer narrative time afforded to the animal kingdom in Kafka’s writing, there is a particular manifestation of Aufmerksamkeit that makes its way through his engagement with allegory, whose etymological origin, ἀλληγορία, denotes figurative or metaphorical language, but literally means “speaking otherwise than one seems to speak, apparently.”

Insofar as allegory names a double-voicing, a bifurcation of language that constitutes figuraiity by disembodying what is phenomenally manifest from the cache of meaning that lies behind the world of presentations, this literary form would seem destined to keep close company with a hermeneutics of depth. One sees the shadow of an aesthetic corollary to the Kantian injunction—always relate to human, self-legislating subjects as ends in themselves—in the tacit rule, stipulating that the appearance of the nonhuman in modern literature signals the necessity of allegorical reading, in which the body of the object or animal is taken to be the vehicle for a higher order of human meaning. The nonhuman’s materiality is to be seen through, its voice to be heard primarily for what is sounded through it. Certainly, one can emphasize the mutual dependence of manifest and latent content; and one can even question any hierarchy that would favor the meaning that lies hidden behind appearances, as gratification for a work ethic well applied to the labor of excavation. What, however, often remains unremarked upon by critiques of suspicious hermeneutics is how the distinction between the allegedly literal appearances written on the text’s surface and the figural, non-manifest meaning, located in the invisible depths, very often codifies a species division, if it

does not more markedly secure and police any threat to human exceptionalism. There are, as one sees perhaps most conspicuously in Freud, norms that exert influence on when one feels the work of interpretation can come to rest in a state of satisfaction and what is liable to be typecast as a vehicle or set apart as a tenor. Substitution has its own logics: a lion may stand in for the king, but rarely does the sovereign stand in for the beast.

To the question of what may be required for a nonhuman to emanate its own meaning—no less within the divided world of allegory—a reply comes into view in the exertions and sometimes frenetic immobility of Kafka’s parables. Notably, Kafka’s allegories, if they can be called that, seem determined not to strike their own target of a transcendental signified. Adorno assesses Kafka’s stories as those that are in a state of disrepair, or appear to have been maimed. “Artworks are lopped off”; “their meaning appears as if it were blocked” (AT 174). In Aesthetic Theory, his remarks on Kafka prepare the way for a more comprehensive definition of modern artworks as broken. He speaks of literary texts often as if they were physical entities that have withstood bodily injury. By virtue of this broken-ness, artworks are bound to the prospect of “the salvation of things,” since, as useless and “non-exchangeable,” they are “no longer enmeshed in the network of guilt” (P 271). At one point, Adorno likens the praxis of “important artists” to the craft of puzzle-making (AT 406). Drawing largely from the sometimes lonely well of Kafka’s writings, which Adorno describes as “a parabolic system, the key to which has been stolen,” he raises enigmaticalness as a definitive quality of authentic art, which respects the taboo on laying bare its own meaning, while also intimating a solution to its “own unsolveable enigma” (P 246). He subsequently proposes that this quality of being riddled [Ratselcharakter] is a result of a historical loss in which art, no longer linked to ritual and magical practices, is shorn of any purpose that can be justified by rationality, archaic or otherwise.

What an artwork means becomes secondary to the predicament that it presents. Adorno’s inordinately long view of the history of aesthetics permits him to make a point about culture’s potential relapse into myth, one that follows through on Benjamin’s suggestions about the waning cultic value of art with the rise of the reproducibility of artifacts on a mass scale. What remains of uncertain necessity is how, in Adorno’s account, the arch-narrative of a lost context in which art was once long ago meaningful starts to sediment into a generalized structure of withholding. Sphinx-like, the artwork, insoluble, demands to be deciphered, makes a show of the immanence of the solution, but under no circumstances, gives it up freely. Certainly, natural histories of destruction give a clue as to why artifacts mediated by the past carry with them opacities to the present. And yet, there is something in Adorno’s thinking, over and above this recognition, which comes close to the valorization of difficulty for its own sake. What begins to emerge is an aesthetic commitment to the virtue of hard inscrutability, a quality with arguably masculinist undertones, which might be plausibly attributed to certain of Kafka’s works, but is bound up with too tough an ethos of tough love to capture adequately something like the comparably short prose of Walser, without crushing it. In short, Adorno presents a tough version of the non-instrumentality of the aesthetic, one which cannot be cracked, unless by the strenuous determination of the subject who has a firm sense of what exceeds him [sic].

This reading of Kafka as the quintessential expression of the fracturedness paradigmatic of the modern aesthetics can be profitably scaled back in scope. I would like to consider more locally how the characteristic non-fulfillment of Kafka’s allegorical praxis is dialectically threaded through the utter, unaccountable ease with which the creaturely not only arrives, but finds its way into enunciation. That the inhuman voice—in its fluency and apparent naturalness—may seem to take
on the quality of the preternatural, is an index of felt estrangement, the distance of remove from
the knowledge that the structure of address is not exhausted by human interactions.

A world of difference separates nihilism from the recurring non-arrivals found in Kafka’s pages:
imperial messages are definitely sent but do not quite deliver; love letters are written piously, but
with the knowledge that will never reach the beloved, who is removed by an incalculable distance
and by the contingent interventions of countless postal workers; grammatically, Kafka’s signature
use of the conditional makes it uncertain whether the long sequence of predicates will come to pass
or whether, once they reach the end, all that has been imagined will drop out, like the very end of a
breath, back into the sentence’s opening “if” (E 43); the first chapter of “The Castle” is entitled
“Arrival,” but K., who persistently tries to make his approach to the fortification, seems only ever
interminably on the way.

Kafka plays this preoccupation with felt endlessness in the key of the comedic banal, the
metaphysically anxious, and in the whole range of affects between. The canonical Kafkan motifs,
which circle around the problematic of never getting to where one has to go have been an
indispensable resource for Kafka’s commentators, as they have attempted to theorize the
operations of law (of genre) (Derrida), the temporality of messianism (Shoel), and the structure
of the sovereign ban (Agamben).

Of great interest in this discussion is how, within Kafka’s work, this tendency toward the dilution of
the present into infinity, which most severely befalls those who are most intent on reaching a goal;
the inscription of the field of immanent action with the hue of impracticability; the ability for even
the most banal of things to inspissate into an insoluble dilemma; and the steady receding of what is
nearest and within reach to a domain that is un-cognizable or altogether shut off to experience—
this whole undercurrent, coursing with difficulty, exists alongside moments of astonishing and
sudden arrival. The interminability of K.’s journey through the penal system and its impossible
architecture stands in relief to the narration of the instantaneous appearance of the nonhuman,
who has, somehow, made its way here, before us. I quote one of Kafka’s short parables:

Es öffnete sich die Tür und es kam, gut im Saft, an den Seiten üppig gerundet, fußlos
mit der ganzen Unterseite sich vorschwebend der grüne Drache ins Zimmer herein.
Formelle Begrüßung. Ich bat ihn völlig einzutreten. Er bedauerte dies nicht tun zu
können, da er zu lang sei. Die Tür mußte also offen bleiben, was recht peinlich war.
Er lächelte halb verlegen, halb tückisch und begann:

Durch Deine Sehnsucht herangezogen, schiebe ich mich von weither heran, bin
biete ich mich Dir an.

[The door opened and what entered the room, fat and succulent, its sides
sumptuously swelling, footless, pushing itself along on its entire underside, was the
green dragon. Formal salutation. I asked him to come right in. He regretted he could
not do that, as he was too long. This meant that the door had to remain open, which
was rather awkward. He smiled, half in embarrassment, half cunningly, and began:
“Called upon by your longing, I come pushing myself along from afar off, and underneath am now scraped quite sore. But I am glad to do it. Gladly do I come, gladly do I offer myself to you.”[13]

For those who have read across Kafka’s works, what may seem miraculous is not that a dragon pledges his fealty but that someone seems actually to have arrived at a destination. If there were a punctum in this denkbild, it would be lodged in the sudden glimpse of the tail that trails out of the open door, unable to be accommodated by the structure of the house. Indeed, one of the first things that Kafka’s animals attune us to is how the built environment, particularly spaces of domesticity, proves uncomfortable, if not punishing, to bodies that are not in accord with human norms and functions. In “Report to an Academy,” another parable that begins straightway with a surprising address, the ape who has been summoned to give an account of himself tells how, after being captured, he is put in a cage that is too low for him to stand up, and also too narrow for him to sit down: he has to remain awkwardly, knees bent and trembling (E 202). Shortly after Gregor Samsa’s transformation, he realizes that in his new state of embodiment he is now too broad to pass through the threshold of his own room. And rather than opening the other side of the double doors, his father drives him through, detaching one of his legs, inducing heavy bleeding. It is not just Gregor’s body that undergoes transformation; through him, one sees human spaces of comfort transpose those of hostility: the bourgeois interior is one in which the inhuman is at pains to maintain its bodily integrity.

III.

Kafka’s parables are unseasonable angels with their wings tied back. By this I mean that they—as what is other to anthropic form but capable nonetheless of addressing the human—stage a movement that does not reach the full breadth of their potential extension. What, we may ask, are the lineaments of this captive movement? To begin, one may note that the appearance of talking creatures outside of children’s literature almost instantaneously codes writing as allegorical—sets it alight, moving toward a distinct but related order of meaning that hovers above the referential plane. No sooner do these prose pieces activate an invitation to allegoresis, scarcely able to be refused, than they, as allegories, show themselves unable to get their feet too far off the ground.

It is through the hull of the literary form of allegory that Kafka makes it possible to receive what the world of the inhuman emanates, as though it weren’t insurmountable to do so. Animals and things impart themselves to the reader by way of a ruse that makes no secret of its own dissemblance. To the quandary of how the inhuman could possibly give off its own meaning within the written word, Kafka responds with a most simple proposition: they simply speak. Creatures bring themselves to expression in direct discourse, in familiar narrative conventions of autobiographical writing, in institutional genres like the report. What they say and think is often given to the reader with as much legibility as is conferred to human protagonists. As with Gregor, his wishes, dismay, and all that subtends his misrecognized gestures become available to the reader in a way that is almost entirely foreclosed by the people within the diegetic world. The animal parables draw a source of animation in the trussing together of literacy in the ordinary sense of the term and literacy with respect to the language of things: to read Kafka’s texts is at the same time to be able, without having learned how to do so, to make out the communication issuing from the object-world. One might

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argue, on the contrary, that Kafka’s creatures are so be-saddled with anthropomorphic weight that they are coerced out of their native tongue into the idiom of the master. I would suggest, however, that the feint of literacy that Kafka performs does not translate into mythic transparency. Odradek, the embodiment of the quality of being broken off, is an unintended aide-mémoire to what, as is said of him, “can never be laid hold of.” “Some say,” the parable begins,


Natürlich würde sich niemand mit solchen Studien beschäftigen, wenn es nicht wirklich ein Wesen gäbe, das Odradek heißt.

[the word Odradek is of Slavonic origin, and try to account for it on that basis. Others again believe it to be of German origin, only influenced by Slavonic. The uncertainty of both interpretations allows one to assume with justice that neither is accurate, especially as neither of them provides an intelligent meaning of the word.

No one, of course, would occupy himself with such studies if there were not a creature called Odradek.]

We are first introduced to Odradek by being initiated into a controversy of origins. From where does this signifier come? We learn quickly that his genesis cannot be stabilized or located within a single linguistic heritage. And there is a question as to whether Odradek’s derivation can be apprehended at all with the resources of cultural memory, or whether one would have to look somewhere other than human history to discover it. What this “other” place and time might be, and whether it could be re-inscribed into human temporalities of creation and destruction, is another uncertainty looming around the corner of this parable. Odradek’s meaning is not, in any case, able to be established by reference to the context of its emergence, which seems to be debated futilely by the community of interpreters.

The third sentence precipitates one of Kafka’s distinctive volte-face, as Ordradek shifts from an object of academic study to one of close encounter—from Wort to Wesen. Within a certain framework, this metamorphosis from linguistic to creaturely existence might be thought of as a shift in attention from the signifier to the signified. The dismissive conclusion about the failure of etymological debates to yield any meaning de-privileges the order of linguistic convention, as the site that generates significance. The significance of the word, rather, seems to be secondary to, or in some way dependent on the existence of, the being to which it refers. The word (Odradek) cannot be properly understood, no less properly used, without an account of the creature who bears that name. But it seems that what Odradek signifies is itself something that cannot keep still—as he-it is inordinately “nimble,” moving as he does in and around architecture, between neutral and masculine pronouns.

The shift in Odradek’s status—from linguistic material to incarnated matter—accomplishes something like the theoretical reorientation engendered by Benjamin’s language essay: a linguistic paradigm in which meaning is thought to be generated by the human determination of what words
designate is not only rendered non-functional; the direction of this process is also reversed, as it were, as what is named suddenly steps forth to call its name into question. In these opening lines, “Odradek” circulates as a term, its semantic value is disputed, but these proceedings remain largely indifferent to Odradek the creature, who is never addressed directly, only spoken about.

“Odradek, ”a word whose meaning cannot seem to be established by fastening it to a history of human use, comes forth subsequently as an object of description: it is a wooden spool with a star-like geometry, a crossbar jutting out of the middle, torn-off threads matted together. This moment of explication, objective in tone—furnishing answers to the basic questions, what does it look like? what is it made of? how is it constructed?—gives way, at the conclusion of the third paragraph, to the stirring suggestion that “with the help” of both a rod on one side and “one of the radiations [Ausstrahlungen, a noun that resonates with Benjamin’s aura] of the star on the other, the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs” (E 189). Something about Odradek’s carriage is reminiscent of a human posture, of organic life, of a corporeal form that is nearly recognizable. It might be said that the whole parable is held back from becoming myth only by the tenuousness of the “as if.”

This moment of textual vivification may recall the scene in which Marx narrates how, the very instant a plain and regular table “steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into a transcendent thing” [verwandelt sich er sich in ein sinnlich übersinnliches Ding]. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas” (C 165). At stake in this metamorphosis is the question of how a material object with a set of ‘natural’ properties—intrinsic, and shaping how a thing can be used—comes to be endowed with a quality of animated existance, which seems to exceed the conditions of earthly embodiment. What’s more—in the course of this process, not only the object transforms, but sensuousness itself seems to become imperceptible—or at least secondary to the captivating animus that lurks within materiality, moving it from within. What Marx presents, here, is less of an analytic argument than a micro-narrative that temporalizes and renders concrete, by incarnating an individual protagonist, the structural distortion of a society in which commodity production prevails. The illusion must be exhibited, even exaggerated, before its lights are turned out.

Holding before the mind’s eye these two visions of wooden things come to life—and perhaps here lies another clue as to why Benjamin initially titled the Araden “A Dialectical Fairytale”—one can see why Adorno and Benjamin, each in their own way, might have felt that something of the enthralment portrayed in “Cares of a Family Man” was in a deep sense reminiscent of the problem of commodity fetishism. “Odradek is the form which things assume in oblivion. They are distorted,” Benjamin writes (G.S2 432; SW2 811). Certainly, one could trace a family resemblance between Odradek and Marx’s portrait of the inversion of material reality that the commodity embodies. Both household objects make their appearance as things disconnected from their originary context, cut off from any clear and direct line to the past that gave rise to them—a past which they nonetheless bear along with them, partly in the form of material traces that may not be legible. An inspection of physical appearance is not enough to determine the context of its emergence, and so, they circulate partially as mobile mysteries. Also mesmerizing is their proximity to a human form that they nevertheless exceed, their queer physical aptitude, which contravenes rationalist presumptions about the inertia of the object-world, while stretching assumptions of what a body can do.
Tempting though it may be to suggest that Odradek stands in, allegorically, for the phenomenon of the commodity fetish, such a reading would have to contend with the possibility that the very logic of (symbolic) substitution might be undermined by Odradek’s elusiveness: he-it, one may recall, is quite literally un-locatable and claims no proper place of living.

Still, by the parable’s end, it remains is terrifically unclear what is meant by the word “Odradek.” To pronounce this name is to speak beyond the scope and capacities of one’s intended meaning. “Odradek,” then, is not meaningless but signifies in such a way whose outcome cannot be anticipated by language-use. Semantically, one cannot easily get something else for him, some other meaning. He it has no place, no possible entry in the thesaurus—is, as Benjamin once refers to him, “a most singular bastard” (GS 431; SW 2810). In his study of Kafka’s gestures, Werner Hamacher continues the work of the first paragraph’s commentators and, carrying forth an investigation of Odradek’s linguistic roots, notes how odradek in Czech means “one without a kind.”

This piece of information, drawn from the documents of the history of human language, does not, as the parable itself suggests, yield any true knowledge of Odradek’s meaning. If anything, this hypothetical origin is an occasion for Kafka to tell a joke, as the potential solution to the riddle of Odradek’s meaning only introduces, under the aegis of learning, the problem once again. Without kind or kin—that is, without species (understood as both group with which one is interchangeable and can reproduce; and also, as coin or circulating medium)—Odradek is the unintentional end of substitutability.

If the two tales of Kafka and Marx are kindred, this is not because they travel parallel trajectories but rather that they traverse one another, and in so doing, form a crucial joint in which a past beyond recall and a redeemed future are articulated together. Marx’s passage narrates the movement from material existence and use-value (the table that we can sense, that has a texture, grooves and broad knots shaped like the red spot of Jupiter) to super-sensible phantasm—the realm of exchange-value. Kafka’s narrator, by contrast, passes from a consideration of Odradek as ideational, as a linguistic entity that exists primarily in the domain of verbal exchange, to an actual, existing being. In a word, Marx offers an account of the commodity’s de-materialization; Kafka the re-incarnation of what we learn has been previously been de-materialized into sign. Again, much rests on the single word wie. Odradek stands as if on two legs: which is to say, the work of anthropomorphism remains visibly marked, as being in a state of incompleteness.

Adorno reads Odradek as a “motif of transcendence” that holds the “secret key” to a future in which the household—and all it represents—will some day be superseded. In the “nearly painful” thought that Odradek will persist, well beyond the father, well beyond his children, well beyond his children’s children, and beyond that, beyond any human lineage, however long, Adorno invests Odradek’s remarkable capacity for “living on” with the promise of hope for “overcoming death”—since as the narrator suggests, only what has an aim in life, or less ambitiously, has some activity that wears out, is capable of dying. Odradek, in other words, is broken free/left behind from not only from familial succession but also from the order of “natural history”—is dis-embedded from rhythms of any recognizable lifecycle (CC 63).

Yet it is unclear whether Odradek can be raised up as a symbol of useless immortality, or of the sublation of the instrumental, without the cost of denying his-its own vulnerability in the world in

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which he remains, quite literally, unsettled. With strings flying everywhere, Odradek is perpetually on the fray. Indeed, Odradek may indeed be surviving in what Adorno refers to as the “no-man’s land between man and thing,” word and being, but the vision of his-its endurance comes to us, focalized through the anxiety and fear—or as the story’s title puts it, through the concern [Die Sorge] of the house-father. Throughout, the story remains distanced from Odradek by the arm’s length of the third-person (P 263). And even when he-it is addressed as a subject, as a du, Odradek does not respond in the first person. It seems, in short, that the I is somehow uninhabitable for Odradek. And we may wonder, indeed, what difficulties might have confronted Kafka if instead of “Cares of a Family Man,” the parable he set out to write were named “Odradek: An Autobiography.”

Perhaps it is not too foolish to suggest that Benjamin might have been drawn to Odradek in part because he-it is shaped like a star. In this wooden physique lies the promise that something might emanate from the strange geometry of the inorganic, might radiate beyond its material frame. Shortly after the vision of Odradek as not-quite humanized, he—and it is in this penultimate paragraph that Odradek is first marked as gendered—like some Hermione of the stairwell, emerges out of unmoving woodenness, and into a newly animated state. We hear from the narrator how Odradek initiates his-its own patterns of migration, has his own independent rhythms of departure and return, tarries in the interstitial spaces of the bourgeois domicile, leans on the banisters (still does not stand without support), lurks about as people make their exit from the private space of their homes.

It seems the referent of the inaugural paragraph has broken through the stillness of its own signifier—come to life and cannot be captured by the instrument of signification that was believed to capture it-him. Earlier, I suggested that in Kafka’s works, the way meaning recedes into inaccessibility, sometimes maddeningly, is not a phenomenon that can be isolated as an atomic motif, but is, rather, helixted together with another feature—namely, the emergence of the self-expression of inhuman matter. The drive to interpretation that is initiated by the opening paragraph and the exchange that follows constitute the two foci of an ellipse, around which Kafka’s parable turns:


[Of course, you put no difficult questions to him, you treat him—he is so diminutive that you cannot help it—rather like a child. "Well, what’s your name?" you ask him. "Odradek," he says. "And where do you live?" "No fixed abode," he says and laughs; but it is only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves. And that is usually the end of the conversation. Even these answers are not always forthcoming; often he stays mute for a long time, as wooden as his appearance.]
Initially presented as an object of theoretical contemplation, Odradek is for the first time not spoken about, but spoken to. The narrator’s questions do not fall on deaf ears, as if the creature were immune or shut out from the realm of signification. Odradek meets this address, appears in the flesh, and responds by speaking his-its own name, in a repetition of the word by none other than the undomesticated signified.

Before us, then, is a peculiar situation in which the material referent speaks back and enunciates itself. Far from being dumb, the inhuman being participates in the pronunciation of what it is called, and in doing so, renders indeterminate whether the signifier takes precedence—as a verbal coinage of the matter to which it refers—or whether the communication issuing from the object gives rise to the order of language. If the latter is true, the scene of encounter, which occurs later in the parable, would in a sense have to be thought of as coming before the linguistic debates that, in the sequence of the narration, precede it: the order of the parable would have read under the sign of reversal.

The aim, of course, is not to try to establish once and for all the primacy of either discursive or material existence, which, in Odradek’s short reply, are shown to be mutually constituting. Returning to the problem that Benjamin helps to formulate, we may note that the potential violence visited upon the object-world by the work of signification is not, in Kafka’s parable, countermanded by allegory’s ban (silence, the retreat to mere description), nor by the redoubling of allegory (Baudelaire).

Instead, the suspension of the allegorical drive—that is, the interruption of the compulsion of material into a relation of substitution—becomes an organ of attentiveness to creaturely existence. This incapacitation of allegory execution is not the result of a drama of self-limitation that consolidates into mastery. This non-arrival at meaning, which does not assume the structure of permission nor of cognitive inadequacy—both which would locate agency on the side of the human subject—is, rather, the condition of possibility for the object’s emanation of its own significance.

The eruption of the thing’s speech, in turn, is held in tension with the heteronomous narration in which it is embedded. Although the object is shown here as breaking through to expression, this expression by no means yields transparency—simply as if, once the voice of the inhuman pierced through the muteness imposed by virtue of being turned into a Träger of (semantic) value, its meaning would be laid bare with instantaneous lucidity. Odradek’s laughter, to say the least, is peculiar: no organs set wind to this expression; and this show of enspiritedness is akin to leaves that have been separated from the tree that gives them life. At the close of the penultimate paragraph, Odradek falls back into a state of de-animated, wooden laconism.

What this parable offers is neither a teaching, nor the spectacle of a thing that has risen up on two legs, in an accomplishment of being human. What we hear, rather, is the precarious expression of what is not quite human—long forgotten and brought to memory in a writing that, as Benjamin says of Kafka’s script, is “full of configurations of forgetting—of silent pleas to recall things to mind” (GS2 682; SW 2.2 498).
Often, what is understood to pass under the sign of the “modernist novel” is a set of representational practices through which consciousness is amplified as a refracting agent of social experience. The prominence, if not predominance, of the perceiving subject finds a formal complement in the tendency, also associated with modernism, for the medium to make itself newly conspicuous—often to the extent that it interferes with the apprehension of the artwork’s content, or comes to take the place of content itself: language that relentlessly declares itself as language, painting that knows itself to be flat. The reception of high modernist fiction has been structured by this twin reflex—or put otherwise, by a double emphasis on interiority and auto-referentiality: and out of this, a picture has developed of a literature that is concerned with the self and with itself, and thus, is drawn in the direction of narcissistic closure.

What eludes this optic, however, is the shadow (not quite the antimony) of self-consciousness and its aesthetic analogue in the self-reflexivity of the autonomous work of art. The priority afforded to strategies for rendering inner life (an aspect privileged by humanist critics), as well as to a text’s aptitude for meta-reflection (accentuated by post-structuralist readings) has caused a vital aspect of this body of work to recede from view: namely, a concern with the ontological precarity of the object-world and an attendant drive to break away from insularity—subjective and textual—without reverting to earlier ideals of verisimilitude.

This essay affords new distance from the thesis that high modernism is tantamount to subjectivism, and, as a corollary, can be easily drawn into affiliation with psychologism and philosophical idealism. These pages work to identify, as an internal tension within modernist fiction—and in Virginia Woolf’s novels in particular—a struggle to set aside its own tendencies toward subjective retreat. The effort to decentralize modernist narratives from the operations of individual (embodied) consciousness has been taken up by those who have reconstructed the socio-political context of twentieth-century literary production—often most fervently for texts whose break with realism is most severe. And yet, the constitutive conflict—between the concentration of the field of novelistic representation into internal, subjective states and the countervailing push, which, comparatively, we know far less about, to give primacy to what is other to consciousness—has yet to be grasped at the level of form.

Form, here, is neither an endpoint nor a fetish. The hope is, rather, that in expanding our conception of modernist form to include narrative strategies not primarily oriented around the writing of the human mind, we will be able to see anew what possibilities are lodged within modernist literature, particularly as it reimagines forms of sociality that are not predicated on indifference, or hostility, to the nonhuman world. So, after long attention to the ascendance of the subjective in modernist narration—epitomized by style indirect libre but evidenced, too, in the intensification of narratorial unreliability to the point of plot’s fracturing—it may be worthwhile to investigate the matter from the side of the object. That is, we might give consideration to claims
about the alleged effacement of the object-world and to the techniques and image-repertoires that were improvised for producing the extra-subjective discursively. Until both can be given full treatment, our view of modernism will remain one-sided and unable to grasp how, in addition to new forms of (urban) subjectivity, writers envisioned unprecedented ways of relating to objects that, in turn, produced novel conceptions of objecthood itself.

This essay queries critical narratives that tell the story of modernist form as precipitating a “loss” of objectivity, one that is often described pejoratively or recuperated by resituating it at the level of psychic reality. A thread that we will follow is the possibility that this “loss” does not always signal a reduction or break from the objective but rather an intimation that the subject’s hold on objects is not firm but tenuous in ways that are not surmountable, nor reducible to a de-historicized state of existential doubt. This tenuousness is different from, say, the way edges of umbrellas or patches of rooftop become indistinct in an impressionist painting: a record essentially of how the world strikes the viewer who perceives it. More than a stylistic shift in the depiction of phenomenological experience, what is being explored is how the hold on objects becomes uncertain whenever there is an alteration to the onto-epistemic grammar, such that the active, self-determining subject and the inert, affectable object are no longer the primary points of reference for parsing existence.

In what follows I trace one of two major efforts of Woolf to turn the inward turn outward, both of which can be located if not in fully developed form then in incipient state, in her 1927 novel. Conceptually, these undertakings exhibit opposing tendencies, one toward the elimination of consciousness (in “Time Passes”), and the other toward its overcoming through a grammatical gesture of extroversion that employs direct discourse to draw interior monologue imperfectly toward exteriorization (present germinally in To the Lighthouse and brought to culmination in The Waves). This chapter attends most closely to the first technique, which will be situated in relation to two axes of thought. First, I will examine how Woolf revises a central trope of philosophical realism—namely the act of hypothesizing the subject’s absence in order to establish the existence of objects as independent and enduring. Second, I will trace correspondences between what I refer to as her practice of writing in absentia and Benjamin’s effort to give credence to a “language of things.”

Between 1916 and 1933, I argue, both thinkers developed their own forms of literary elegy, eschewing the natural world as a sympathetic mourner of personal loss to draw, instead, on language to lament the silence it itself inflicts on all that falls outside the realm of human speech.

1. The reddish-Brown Stocking

What is the fate of objects in the fictional worlds of Woolf? As early as Auerbach, one finds that no sooner is there a recognition of Woolf’s technical accomplishment in representing interiority than there arises a complementary concern that “objective reality” might be in jeopardy, if not obliterated (his word).1 Consider, in the chapter of Mimesis called “The Brown Stocking,” Auerbach’s portrait of Woolf’s novel, which he depicts as something of a disappearance act:

    The writer as a narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae. When it is a question of the house, for example, or the Swiss maid, we are

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not given the objective information which Virginia Woolf possesses regarding these objects of her creative imagination but what Mrs. Ramsay thinks or feels about them… [T]here actually seems to be no viewpoint at all outside the novel from which the people and events within it are observed, any more than there seems to be an objective reality apart from what is in the consciousness of the characters. Remnants of such a reality survive at best in brief references to the exterior frame of the action, such as ‘said Mrs. Ramsay, raising her eyes…’ (M 534)

*To the Lighthouse* is a book largely composed of vistas—that is, of scenes of looking, and the flights of mind that take place between moments of perception. Woolf’s signature form—what Auerbach refers to as the “multipersonal representation of consciousness”—imposes a set of conditions under which things can make their appearance (M 534). Typically, objects come into being only when they are noticed, or when they are within striking range of a practical consciousness. One only comes to know of a staircase when a character touches down on one of the steps. The brown stocking materializes only when it is worried over or worked upon, and taken up in the hands Mrs. Ramsay.

One could claim that in Woolf’s novels things are subordinate, though essential, to the field of intersubjective relations. Subordinate not only because in the majority of sentences in which things appear, they are relegated to the position of the direct object. But also, the goods in the Ramsay’s household are tacitly bound by the law of property: the social form that binds things to a human claim and submits them, legally, to will of their owners. If one accepts a minimal correspondence between the differentially distributed attention to entities within a text and their relative weight in the social order depicted, the minor status of the object-world is further confirmed, for they suffer from neglect in comparison to the life of the mind, which is afforded a far greater share of the narration. Things appear fleetingly; and the moment they appear, they seem already to be pressed in upon, already welded into reflection.

And yet, as we know, objects are essential—for mediating psychic attachments, for providing relief from the social demands of conversation, and for offering a timely reprieve from the emotional labor that seems to fall disproportionately on women. At least when Mr. Ramsay is bearing down upon her, Lily can take refuge in the coffee cup that offers itself benevolently as a resource of distraction. As in Proust, objects seem singularly capable of releasing processes of reminiscence and transports of feeling. And in terms of form, things make Woolf’s free indirect style possible, as they act as a device for facilitating shifts in perspective by acting as the bridge that enables transit from one consciousness to another. Someone takes a thoughtful glance at a plate of fruit, we pause momentarily to look, and then we are carried off lightly to the next mind.

In addition to understanding the subordination of things as the byproduct of a form that employs a maximal degree of internal focalization, it can also be recognized as part of an aesthetic and political commitment that Woolf makes explicit. In her critical writing, she positions modern fiction in opposition to an earlier generation of Edwardian writers, whom she derisively refers to as “materialists.” Her charge of vulgar materialism contains a double accusation—one that targets the classist leanings of authors who choose only to depict the exclusive world of luxury hotels, first-class carriages, and in so doing, enforce the social invisibility of all but the elite; and second, she objects to a stultifying realism, a programmatic fixation on lifeless details that ultimately leaves its characters forsaken and degrades literature to reportage. The Edwardians, she writes, “laid an enormous stress

upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there.\(^3\) In an act of ventriloquism, she parodies the bureaucratic process by which a realist unfolds character: “begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of. Describe cancer. Describe calico. Describe—But I cried: Stop! Stop!” (208).

So much has come to rest on To the Lighthouse and Mrs. Dalloway, novels that have come to mark the development of Woolf’s formal technique, which has in turn come to typify the high modernist aesthetic and its corresponding \textit{weltanschauung}—one that affirms the primacy of the human subject; understands such a subject as monadic—conceived on the model of a private room, which, on occasion, can be furnished with a window; and presumes that what is not human belongs to an object-world that either lies at the disposal of anthropic production or else becomes selectively elevated for fetishistic appreciation. With this in mind, one may perhaps observe more clearly that the affiliation between modernist fiction and psychoanalysis—both of which thrived during the interwar period—lies not only in a thematic concern with psycho-sexual dimensions of experience, nor only in the concerted effort to bring processes of (un)conscious life to speech. For both, discursive production takes as an operating assumption the fungibility of objects. “The Brown Stocking,” in other words, is something of a misnomer, as the exegesis is less concerned with the brown stocking per se, than with how the object might as well have been something else—how it becomes “nothing but an occasion” for the reflections that it releases—reflections at once seemingly random, and yet able to express, as Auerbach argues, something essential about the totality of lived experience (\textit{M 541}).

The total contingency of the object (Jean Laplanche’s phrase) is not a law, but a characteristic feature, a problematic intrinsic to modernism and psychoanalysis alike.\(^4\) At stake, in other words, is a certain kind of object loss that does not signal a complete absence but instead an erosion of specificity that is enacted in Auerbach’s title, in which the object becomes nearly archetypal. In Woolf’s text, the stocking is described as “hairy” and “reddish-brown,” not once simply “brown.” Note how, for Auerbach, the contingency of the individual yet interchangeable object indexes a broader instability, namely, the text’s compromised access to objectivity writ large. In question here are discourses in which the object cannot be stabilized in its concreteness and yet is nonetheless able to act as an indispensable prop, a “remnant,” or, where dream-work is concerned, as a talismanic clue that allows a connection to “externality” to be maintained. These are discourses that meet the object with itinerance, if not restlessness, since the greater concern lies in attending to what it triggers within the subject.\(^5\)


\(^4\) Laplanche’s claim about the object’s contingency does not imply that psychoanalysis displays a wholesale indifference to the specific qualities of objects of affection or aggression. As evidenced by dream-work, the details about shape, texture (the chocolate bars wrapped in green paper; the beard is yellow) are of paramount importance to the hermeneutic enterprise. The problematic of the object’s contingency emerges, rather, as an aspect of Freud’s biologist theory of the drive (\textit{Trieb}). The sexual drive, Freud insists, must be thought of as independent from the object. In other words, it is not generated out of a desire for a particular thing, person, or partial person. As Laplanche explains: “The drive comes to be seen merely as … pressure or energy which attaches itself to (or detaches itself from) anything whatever, as it might to a decoy.” Jean Laplanche, \textit{Essays on Otherness}, trans. Luke Thurston (New York: Routledge, 1999), 73.

\(^5\) Where psychoanalysis is concerned, “objects” may very well be and very often are human. One may remember that in the Kleinian account reparations may very well be made to a person to whom they are not due; the same proves true for the discharge of aggression. The fungibility of objects posited by psychoanalysis makes it rather difficult to say, at any
What has been sketched above is an account of the object’s trivialization and its reinvestment with significance, counter-intuitively, on account of its triviality (i.e., the red stocking becomes important precisely because it could very well have been something else). The contingency of the object could be recriminated on several grounds, including the anxiety about the decline of an introspective hermeneutic into solipsism, and the association of the object’s fungibility with alienation (the Marxist critique). More compelling than routine criticisms about psychoanalysis and modernism’s trumping up of subjectivity is how curious it is that the following two phenomena appeared contemporaneously: in epistemology, the full articulation of the problem of “other minds,” which analytic philosophy imagines to be positioned at a distance, subject to doubt, nearly impossible to “get to”; and in psychoanalysis a systematic investigation of processes of identification and the elaboration of the hypothesis that transit between minds is almost all too easily carried out—much like the mysterious freedom with which stream of consciousness narration ranges fluidly in and out of the permeable thoughts of disparate characters.

Woolf writes at the juncture of these traditions, which seem to speak in different tongues but represent complementary developments. While psychoanalysis will forge a science that, to a large extent, implies the contingency of the object, Cambridge realism organizes its epistemology around a likewise disequilibriated position, namely, the total contingency of the subject.

II. Realism’s Spectral Subjects

A curious aspect of modern philosophical Realism is that it establishes as “real” only that which can withstand my absence (where the me behind my is a hypothetical, universalizable subject of experience). “Think of a kitchen table when you’re not there”: Andrew Ramsay’s summation of his father’s research on “subject and object and the nature of reality” distills the conceit whose operation we will first examine, before positioning it in relation to Woolf’s fictional experiment.6

To dispel what might be an initial source of confusion: the concern here is not with the “death of the subject,” or the displacement of self-present I onto a trans-individual structure of language. The problematic involves, rather, how the fiction of leave-taking is made to guarantee object constancy—-not, as one might expect, in a scene of psychic attachment, but within the framework of Realism, with a majuscule. Within Realist arguments that, like their literary counterparts, unfold within the space of the everyday, the proposition that reality is identified with what is indifferent to subjective apprehension is charged with the force of the intuitive. An “instinctive belief,” as Bertrand Russell calls it. If a table were real, how wonders, would it not make sense that it would outlast my perception of it—-would remain, even when I step into the other room? Despite its appeal to common sense, this line of reasoning plays out a peculiar logic which survives in the present revial of realism in its “speculative,” and arguably melodramatic, form.8

7 Bertrand Russell, Problems of Philosophy (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1912), 17. Cited hereafter as PP.
8 Speculative realism does not, as it purports to do, overcome epistemology so much as it newly aggrandizes one of the latter’s central conceits. It does so, in part, by generalizing the observing subject so that it becomes the doublet of the human as species, and by investing the speculative condition of spatial remove with a temporal axis. The prompt, in other words, is not only to consider what happens when a hypothetical witness leaves the room but to consider what remains when humans as whole are removed from the face of the planet. One problem with such an exercise, if it is to
In the early decades of the twentieth century, Bloomsbury was the site of convergence for a reappraisal of realism in aesthetic and philosophical terms (which sometimes meet but are by no means isomorphic). The following will be considered together as a moment that might have marked a tighter chiasmatic crossing had the movements away and toward “realism” not taken place in semi-autonomous spheres: the Cambridge Apostles—in particular, the trio of Russell, Whitehead, and Moore—declare a “revolt” against British Idealism in the service of a “new realism”; at the same time, Woolf polemically defines modern fiction against the procedural, descriptive practices of the realist Edwardian novel. The task ahead is to consider realism as it is split down the husk—referring, in philosophy, to the rejection of the proposed identity of reality and mind (a then-operative caricature of the idealist position); and in art, to a mode of representation that affirms its mimetic tie to the world “as it is.” These two senses of realism will always in some sense speak past each other—not least because literary realism qua representation is unable to shake itself of the subjective mediation that its philosophical counterpart will seek to minimize. Nevertheless, the (non)relation between these divergent notions of reality can be fruitfully studied, for they comprise a significant part of what is at stake Woolf’s depiction of the topos of the everyday.

In *The Phantom Table*, Ann Banfield resolves the disparity between philosophical and aesthetic realism by proposing that a Russelian theory of knowledge grounds Woolf’s art. In her view, Woolf’s novels reflect a universe that is essentially monadological—comprised of atomistic, private points of time and space. Within such a world, she argues, “objects are reduced to ‘sense-data’ separable from sensations”; subjects, correspondingly, are diminished into “perspectives.” Her reading situates Woolf’s work within an epistemological framework enveloped by the nimbus of Apostolic influence. Beyond the uncertainty of whether a consistent foundation can be said to underlie experimentally discontinuous works, one may also wonder whether such an interpretation misses an important discursive difference. Novelistic discourse, its unsettled definition notwithstanding, allows for objects to be put into play in diverse and inconsistent ways. The very same article—Minta’s lost brooch, the hairy stocking—can be regarded primarily as an allegorical, psychoanalytic, epistemological, or economic object. And because of the perspectival variation afforded by the cast of characters, these modalities can even be activated simultaneously, which can become a source of dramatic tension or comedic misunderstanding. When the philosopher Mr. Ramsay looks at kitchen furniture, he “sees” only sensibilia; whereas when Lily tries to imagine the same thing, she is overtaken by a vision of an austere table, discomposed from its upright position in the realm of abstraction and lodged instead in the branches of a pear tree(!) with “its four legs in the air” (*TL* 23). “Cambridge is too much of a cave,” Woolf writes in her diary, the day after she meets with G.E. Moore.11

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9 The “revolt” in Russell’s own words: “It was towards the end of 1898 that Moore and I rebelled against both Kant and Hegel. Moore led the way, but I followed closely in his footsteps. … [Our rebellion centred upon] the doctrine that fact is in general independent of experience….” *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), 22.


And yet, between philosophical and aesthetic realism there is a point of contact, irreducible to intellectual influence, which persists well into the post-war period. This meeting-place can be approached by way of a question that will lead us through a small detour: where, in Antonio López García’s “Lavabo y Espejo,” has the observing subject gone? Has it been forgotten? Removed? Disappeared? Surgically omitted? Painted clean?

The surface of the picture, which looks like a photograph from afar, is covered in what Barthes would call those “futile details” that produce the reality-effect—extraneous facts, hardly functional elements that add nothing to narrative trajectory, but are there to connote this is real. The faint halo of brown ringing round the five drainage holes. The bunched rag at the base of the frame. The veneer of dirt—how, in certain places, the grout between tiles grows bolder, elsewhere, lighter. The slight shadow cast by the beaded chain that snakes its way from the faucet to the drain. All this speaks, in Barthes’s words, to a “referential plenitude.” The painting approaches pure notation or a pure denotation, as the aggregate of plain objects come together in an image of “concrete reality.”

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Fig. 1
Lavabo y Espejo [Sink and Mirror] (1967)
Antonio Lopez Garcia
Oil on Wood
38 ½ x 33 in.
But what is to be done with the flagrant lapse of fidelity that occupies the center of the field of vision? What to make of this looking-glass which exercises selective vision—capturing a faithful reflection of the perfume bottle, the tip of the shaving brush, but refusing to duplicate the observer? Scarcely is there a glimpse of the person to whose presence the toiletries offer a testament, nor a sighting of the painter who, in order to record the scene, must have stood before it. Nor, finally, is there any vision of the extra-pictorial observer, whose gaze finds nothing in the blankness of the reflection to recognize as her own.

The mirror improbably sees no viewer who looks. It forcibly breaks with mimesis and unsees seeing. As such, it performs the opposite function of the reflective instrument found in the depths of Velasquez’s “Las Meninas.” For the latter shows nothing of the contents that appear within the composition, bypasses the represented space altogether, and cuts straight through to the painting’s exterior, to reflect the image of the sovereign pair that sits in front of the scene depicted. García’s “Mirror,” by contrast, offers only what is already within the field of reference. It refuses to visually acknowledge any purveyor within or beyond its inert world of things. The shallow space remains shallow—foregoing the opportunity to open up the picture plane onto a fictitious depth.

If the mirror in “Las Meninas” draws what is exterior to the painting into its interior—and if the result is an infinite oscillation (“the entire picture is looking out at a scene for which it is itself a scene”), García’s bathroom generates a convex infinity, propelled by the repeated expulsion of the observer, who, if one makes a calculation based on the angles of the reflections cast by objects on the shelf, is situated just left of the picture’s midline. The gaze of the painter in “Las Meninas” implicates the viewer in the space of representation, drawing us into a circuit of visibility by virtue of being seen and made into a scene. By contrast, García’s painting does the work of subjective extrication—an interruption, halting, and closing off of (the work’s) self-reflexivity.

There remains an indelible trace of the subject whose perspective organizes the “objective” image, though it manifests only at the level of structure, not content. The horizontal band, the blip, which bifurcates the picture plane—operating as the visual analogue of the “and” between “Sink and Mirror”—enforces a partition. The glance forward at the mirror and the glance downward at the basin—two lines of sight, most common for use—ordinarily could not be held together in the same view. The sightlines come together in an unobtrusive diptych. The dividing line is a suture.

Not only does this composition make a spectacle of vacancy, it produces a space that cannot be entered. That is, the space cannot be entered if the referential claim is to be honored. One might argue that the tension is dispelled if one simply considers that what is represented is an abstract perspective—a point of light that does not necessarily have to be occupied by an embodied viewer. But the medium is crucial. As a painting, drawn from life—and not, say, a photograph taken by an unattended camera—the observer (who paints from this frontal perspective) would have to be deliberately written out. This effacement generates a movement that is redoubled for the spectatorial (rather than authorial) viewer. One steps before the painting, but the very instant that its promise of verisimilitude is accepted, it is broken, for the reflection proves untrue. To take in this vision of the “real” is at the same time to be expelled from its space: one enters, is evicted, one enters again, and one is driven out once more. The representation, executed under the sign of realism, works to deconstitute the subject in the visual field. This banishment is not punctual but is a continual process,

renewed every time the painting is seen. Its grammatical mode would be the gerund: the observing subject is perpetually being removed by persistently being un-figured.

This is precisely the defining gesture staged by modern philosophical realism.

For the generation following Leslie Stephen, one of the central problems of philosophy was to establish the reality of objects, given that they can only be known by means of immediate, private sensory experience. Such lines of inquiry were often deployed within the domain of the prosaic—a field that to a large extent had already been coded and made legible by the nineteenth-century novel.

Russell’s Problems of Philosophy—published fifteen years before the phantom table of the To the Lighthouse makes its appearance—opens by asking, in the first person, how I know whether the table that I am leaning on is real. Russell’s argument builds momentum by rehearsing a scene of skepticism whose setting is the domestic interior. He proceeds by interrogating the appearance of everyday objects, noting the discrepancies in the way something looks when observed from different vantage points. His Realism emerges out of a struggle with multiperspectivalism; only, unlike Woolf, he aims to resolve perceptual variation into a normative horizon of what a “normal” viewer would see in any given circumstance. As in other tracts, including Moore’s “Refutation of Idealism,” the table is a rhetorically privileged object because its specificity does not get in the way of its elevation as the exemplary test-case for a theory of knowledge:

...we have to ask ourselves whether, in any sense at all, there is such thing as matter. Is there a table which has a certain intrinsic nature, and continues to exist when I am not looking, or is the table merely a product of my imagination, a dream-table in a very prolonged dream? This question is of greatest importance. For if we cannot be sure of the independent existence of objects, we cannot be sure of the independent existence of other people’s bodies, and therefore still less of other people’s minds... Thus if we cannot be sure of the independent existence of objects, we shall be left alone in a desert—it may be that the whole outer world is nothing but a dream, and that we alone exist. This is an uncomfortable possibility...  

So much comes to rest on the special fungibility of this lone piece of furniture, which, in the course of Russell’s argument, briskly becomes a metonym for physical objects writ large and for the promise of something other than the desert of individuality. Interestingly, Russell bases his account of intersubjectivity on relations with objects. And so, where the table is concerned, nothing less than materiality and sociality are jointly at stake. Summoned as a testament to bare matter, a touchstone in an eddy of doubt, this domestic object exceeds the literality that has been ascribed to it. In the way in which Russell’s table becomes superadecuate to itself, the reality effect is at work. The table does not just perform exemplarity; it is also solicited for its power to connote the purely denotative, to evoke the unornamented referent that is able to withstand, in austere constaney, any subjective variation. What makes the table the choice specimen of all objects, and what, furthermore, enables it to be drawn so totally into the logic of exemplarity, is precisely that it is made to testify not to its own concrete existence but to objecthood (as category) and to the real writ large. This object-choice is prior to proof. Even before Russell, as it were, goes to work on the table, it is already acting as a prop which signifies the real that he has yet to demonstrate.

Barthes notices how the entirety of the denotative order is charged with the power to pass, more convincingly than the connotative, as mind-independent. The observation that this feat is accomplished “without saying so” is worth emphasizing—not so much in order to expose an ideological ruse as to mark how the ostensibly laconic quality of the denotative helps to generate impression that speech is vacant of a subject. In other words, even beyond sphere of the literary, the reality effect is at work whenever there is an assumption that the denotative is somehow more proximate to the real, and is thus able to make a smoother, quieter passage from language to non-linguistic materiality. This familiar lesson of post-structuralist thought might require re-learning, especially at a time when a belief is circulating that the closer one approaches the zero-degree of linguistic intervention, the higher the quotient of reality.

In the analysis of the table that has just been worked through, it was suggested that the table is invested with discursive fungibility. This mutability, however, should be distinguished from the contingency of the object that Laplanche suggests is characteristic of psychoanalysis. If, in the latter, the specificity of the object tends to be secondary to the psychic processes that are the target of interpretation, in Russell’s Realism, the fungibility of the object “proves” not an underlying set of subjective operations but rather the contingency of the subject. Early in the exposition, Russell sets up the following reality test:

The problem we have to consider is this: Granted that we are certain of our certain of our own sense-data, have we any reason for regarding them as signs of the existence of something else, which we can call the physical object? When we have enumerated all the sense-data which we should naturally regard as connected with the table, have we said all there is to say about the table, or is there still something else—something not a sense-datum, something which persists when we go out of the room? Common sense unhesitatingly answers that there is. What can be bought and sold and pushed about and have a cloth laid on it, and so on, cannot be a mere collection of sense data. (PP 19-20)

The logical priority of the private—the self-evidence with which it is taken to be most sure—has the effect of establishing the social as something that has to be arrived at, deduced. The real, correspondingly, will be located in a proximate elsewhere—beyond direct experience, or, located architecturally, in the neighboring room. Here, and throughout the argument, Russell shifts freely between the first and third-person plural, sometimes inhabiting the mental state of the I who doubts, at other times, the we for whom the stakes of such an skeptical enterprise become amplified. By the time this passage appears, Russell’s refurbished Cartesian doubt has already been collectivized into a social problem. Rhetorically, he has made the leap beyond the I before he is able to do so in the argument. Hence the odd formulation from the passage quoted earlier: “We alone exist.”

One effect of installing the private as the foundational moment of inquiry is that the “neutral public object”—the “real” that, if his argument succeeds, will be secured—is defined as surplus, as that which is in excess of what is mine. This surplus, in turn, is guaranteed by the prospect of exchange. Unsurprisingly, the I re-emerges when the table is re-identified as an article of property:

I bought my table from the former occupant of my room; I could not buy his sense-data, which died when he went away, but I could and did buy the confident

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15 Barthes, 147.
expectation of more or less similar sense-data…. Thus it is the fact that different people have similar sense-data, which makes us suppose that over and above the sense-data there is a permanent public object which underlies or causes the sense-data of various people at various times. (PP 21)

Russell’s exit from the “uncomfortable” state of doubt is accomplished by a swift shift in registers from the epistemological to the economic. Proof of the object’s reality is guaranteed by the success of commerce and its ability to uphold the social objectivity of value—implicitly understood to be the money-form. The table, which was already fungible before being hypothetically sold (as the table that could be any table, and a Table that could be any object)—must be able to persist through a transaction. Indifference to the object’s specificity finds a complement, then, in the requisite indifference of (economic) reality to the individual possessor and her personal investments. The dispensability of the subject and the object go hand in hand: the object could be any object, and the (economic) real is that which underlies whatever any subject qua consumer/seller might see.

The refutation of idealism depends on the somewhat perverse delimitation of the real as that which can survive the hypothesized absence of the subject and any of experiential connection with it. Two prototypical scenarios of the subject’s dispensability include first, leaving the room, so that one is no longer able to look at (and by extension know) the object that will then be conjectured to remain—an exercise that registers anxiety about world-loss; and second, a leave-taking of the object modeled on losing or gaining possession. Realism validates itself by producing such occasions of self-absentiation—test-cases in which the real is deduced by means of imagining the subject’s removal. As in Garcia-Lopez’s picture, the real is where the subject cannot be seen, where, spatially, it cannot enter; such a Realism at once repels the subject and makes it maximally dispensable. Russell’s initial criterion of mind-independence becomes augmented into a state of total indifference. And Realism’s founding premise of self-certain individualism returns, in mirror image, in its conclusion: the reality of the object-world is secured, but only as it is severed from the subject, who, likewise, was initially assumed to be and will remain still from the world removed.

III. Time Passing

We began with the assessment that things typically appear in Woolf’s fiction only insofar as they appear to a character and fall within ambit of that character’s perception or use. On this basis, one might readily indict her formal entrenchment in inwardness, which, when read alongside with her high estimation of modern fiction’s thematic treatment of the “dark places of psychology,” might be seen as a reflection of a worldview that affirms the primacy of the anthropic horizon. But how might this portrait of Woolf’s work change when we read in her preparatory notebooks aspirations for the world she was about to invent?”

March 14th. Dalloway to a new book. It must have some unity, though I want to publish each character separately. One of the characters is to be a pair of candlesticks, or a vase of flowers. another the picture. another a long conversation. All character—not a view of the world…

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16 Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 86.
This remark prompts us to ask whether her abiding commitment to character is confirmation that, despite her experimentalism, Woolf remains ensconced in humanism, or whether it was through an engagement with character—and her attempt to de-laminate it from personhood—that she would most forcibly challenge the human exceptionalism ingrained in the novelistic tradition. Perhaps, as Woolf intimates, the nonhuman emerges not in an abandonment of writing nor in the speculative leap to the non-discursive, but rather by setting language alight in order to reconfigure the prevailing onto-epistemic grammar.

Any verdict that conclusively identifies Woolf with a subjectivist humanism falters once the page is turned to “Time Passes”—the novel’s internal exception to the Woolf of the mind. Many of her commentators have noted the disorienting quality of this intervening section, which is the second and shortest of To the Lighthouse’s three parts. About it, there is little critical consensus, save for the acknowledgement that it marks a dramatic stylistic shift and that, within these pages, the Great War is registered, but only obliquely so. Despite being widely read, “Time Passes” remains one of most obscure corners of Woolf’s oeuvre. Spivak interprets this interlude as lapse into a “discourse of madness,” a moment of “unhinging,” within the longer trajectory of an autobiographical roman a clef.18 Other critics read this section as a “dark fantasia of the unconscious” (Julia Briggs) or as a “condemned corridor” that divides two “torn halves of a single Odyssey” (Maude Ellman).19 This small sample is meant to show how, when commenting about this portion of the novel, Woolf’s readers are often drawn mimetically into its own performance of heightened figuration. There are reasons for this hermeneutic difficulty which can be specified more distinctly than by ascribing to her prose some vague quality of experimentalism. Understanding what is at play in this linguistic shift requires us to revisit the problematics associated with realism—not in order to demonstrate how her fiction reiterates the philosophical stance of Cambridge, but rather to see how Woolf transfigures its central conceit.

What manifests in “Time Passes” as stylistic peculiarity, or, affectively, as felt disorientation, is bound to the furtive, referential tie to the event of war but also to two other matters: an attempt to dislodge language from an anthropocentricism that it can never wholly abandon, and a related interest in things that fall below the threshold of certain existence—things that cannot quite be “picked out” by denotation and are not quite “there” enough to meet the minimal requirements for an (already minimal) statement of existential predication. Between nothing and there exists, analytic logic can say very little. This is precisely what Woolf develops a language for.

§

“Time Passes” was borne out of experiential discontinuity. Woolf composed most of To the Lighthouse while in retreat in her countryside home in Rodmell. It is strange, though somehow fitting, that she would abandon her pastoral outpost and travel to London in order to write the least populated portion of her story. She wrote a draft of this textual interlude during the general strike of 1926—during a suspension of the social order, a cessation of happening, when materials would have been temporarily loosed from ordinary processes of production. She begins a diary entry,

written during this nine-day period of social unrest, with a parenthetical remark: “(one of the curious effects of the Strike is that it is difficult to remember the day of the week).” In her manuscript, time is likewise described as indistinguishable, as it passes on unmarked and unmarkable: “(for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together)” (TL 134).

Throughout this interlude, Woolf intimates a world in which consciousness is no longer the primary structuring principle of material reality. In her notes, Woolf sketches the structure of the novel in architectural terms, describing it as “two blocks joined by a corridor.”

The drawing represents “Time Passes” as the narrow passage between the first and third parts, an interstitial place between rooms, between two semi-autonomous spaces of interiority. In a letter to Ottoline Morell, Woolf confesses that “Time Passes” was more difficult to write than the other two sections combined. Elsewhere, she insisted that it could not be accomplished as prose. “This impersonal thing,” she called it (D III, 36). Her diary offers a clarifying remark that distinguishes her aesthetic from Eliot’s scientific notion depersonalization as a sacrificial gesture of self-transcendence for the sake of a tradition, located in the “mind of Europe”: “here is the most difficult abstract piece of writing—I have to give an empty house, no people’s characters, the passage of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling to” (D III, 76).

“Time Passes” begins with everyone taking leave of the house. All the lamps are extinguished, and the novel is given over to that which darkness occasions. Dimmed and deserted, the scenario is to be eyeless—bereft of any line of sight, bereft of an I on which to hang time’s passing and without the vectors of seeing that elsewhere orchestrate the play of perspective. Recalling the link between epistemological certainty and visual acuity (sight was believed to be the most reliable sense, touch being one of the most debased), one might say that to be eyeless is to be lodged in world in which things cannot be laid claim by the knowing, anthropic gaze.

The movement away from subjectivity—this lingering in the uncertain passage between rooms of one’s own—asks what kind of apprehension of a familiar world might become possible when human consciousness is kept in abeyance. It is not just that Cambridge Realism is incorporated into the novel as a thematic concern, which reflects the zeitgeist. Rather, “Time Passes” is her creative re-working of the philosophical conundrum. For within in this section, she enlarges the Realist conceit of the human on leave, expands it and plays with it. She gives subjective vacancy an impossible texture and duration, broadening the notion of unseen sensibilia to include a synesthetic dimension: “Listening (had there been any one to listen)” (TL 134). Part of her retort is that she

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21 In Appendix A of *To the Lighthouse* (1989), “Preliminary Notes.”
takes the phantom table problem all too literally, staging within the diegetic world the scenario of absence that in philosophy is meant to be hypothetical:

So with the house empty and the doors locked and the mattresses rolled round, those stray airs…blustered in, brushed bare boards, nibbled and fanned, met nothing in bedroom or drawing-room that wholly resisted them but only hangings that flapped, wood that creaked, the bare legs of tables, saucepans and china already furred, tarnished, cracked. What people had shed and left—a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes—those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated; … how once the looking-glass had held a face…. Now, day after day, light turned … its sharp image on the wall opposite. (TL 129)

Released from the ensemble of people who otherwise structure novelistic experience, things come into view in a way that was not possible before. They are able to be apprehended not exclusively as objects determined by the subjects to whom they are tethered. Deserted by their owners, things are released from their functional role as inert articles of property—a shift marked by the disappearance of the possessive pronoun (“her shawl,” for instance, becomes “the shawl”). The stakes of this narrative experiment are not restricted to the epistemic. “Time Passes” remains within the setting of possessive individualism—bourgeois private property—but de-individualizes the scene. If, as Macpherson suggests, the picture of the individual surrounded by accumulated goods constitutes the western ideal of selfhood, defined as ownership, Woolf presents a counter-image of a collection of items whose possessors have been sent off stage. These unpropertied things fall into an enlivening obsolescence, appearing for the first time as the self-moving subjects of sentences, and joined, in company, by the creaturely life newly admitted onto the premises:

Only the Lighthouse beam entered the rooms for a moment, sent its sudden stare over bed and wall in the darkness of winter, looked with equanimity at the thistle and the swallow, the rat and the straw. Nothing now withstood them; nothing said no to them. Let the wind blow; let the poppy seed itself and the carnation mate with the cabbage. Let the swallow build in the drawing-room, and the thistle thrust aside the tiles, and the butterfly sun itself on the faded chintz of the arm-chairs. Let the broken glass and the china lie out on the lawn and be tangled over with grass and wild berries. (TL 138)

The peculiar conjunction of the simple past tense and the insistent “now” evokes a phantom temporality—a fluctuation between was and is—that is as difficult to place as the voice that enters, issuing a series of allowances whose source and target are both unclear. The syntactical repetition—Let the…—suggests a language invested with authority, but what is permitted is only that which would have already happened without permission having been granted.

It is on these abandoned and newly animated grounds that we may begin to enlarge Woolf’s legacy to include not only representational strategies of interiority but also a literary practice of writing in absentia—that is, a technique of narration that approaches asubjectivism without ascending to omniscience. Woolf recognized the significance of ordinary psychic processes but also the force of

imagining the dispensability of a transcendental subject that had become the axial point of the modern episteme. She also sensed that the effort to forge realism by excising subjectivity would be always afflicted by a haunting. And it is her conjuring of ghostly presences, her evocation of unreality in “Time Passes,” which allow us to credit her with another insight: namely, that the problem of the phantom table would be fated to that of the spectral subject.

From a narratological standpoint, what might be called, in an inversion of Barthes’s term, the “unreality-effect” is generated by the removal of any mediating consciousness from a novel that, until this point, has relied heavily on free indirect discourse—a form that is independent of any particular character but requires, minimally, some minds amongst which it can rove. Unreality arises from Woolf’s dual impulse to unpeople the world while refusing to cross over into the threshold of narratorial objectivity. “Time Passes,” in other words, draws its breath from the ghostly space between idealism and the subjective (affiliated with stream of consciousness narration and high modernism) and realism and the objective (identified, in Woolf’s thinking, with description and the nineteenth-century Victorian novel).

Many of Woolf’s commentators associate the impersonality of “Time Passes” with an omniscient perspective, an assumption that, while understandable, misses the tenor of hesitance that pervades this voice.24 The demonstrative function of language gives way to an incantatory “as if,” a phrase that appears relentlessly in these pages, and casts uncertainty over what is posited by the narratorial presence (as if Penelope herself, acting through these two words, were unraveling the content that the sentence put forth):

Nothing stirred in the drawing-room or in the dining-room or on the staircase. Only through the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind (the house as ramshackle after all) crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost one might imagine them, as they entered the drawing-room questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall? Then smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly as if asking the red and yellow roses on the wall-paper whether they would fade, and questioning (gently, for there was time at their disposal) the torn letters in the waste-paper basket, the flowers, the books, all of which were now open to them…(TL. 138)

“Almost,” “one might”—such qualifiers cause the declarative force of these sentences to subside into an aureole of approximation. One finds all the linguistic elements that Seymour Chatman has argued give a quality of heightened abstraction to the late style of Henry James: the penchant for turning qualities into entities; a great proportion of nouns whose referent is intangible; a tendency toward precognitive states, like wondering.25 Woolf enhances the effect of indefiniteness—taking it to an extreme by filling the place of the grammatical substantive with “nothing.”

What seems significant, here, is less the fictional demonstration of the persistence of unobserved sensibilia than the cultivation of a rhetoric of hesitance—irreducible to subjective doubt—that spreads out in the wake of interiority’s evanescence. Objecting to the attenuation of her sentences,

Arnold Bennett complains in his book review that “the distance between her nominatives and her verbs is steadily increasing.” Indeed, in these pages we find as much conjecture and hypothesized resemblance as we do indicative statement. The denotative function of language slackens, dissipates—un-possessed of anything like the “performative” authority that Jonathan Culler associates with literary omniscience. The writing empties itself of propositional content—so that it contains scarcely an assertion about the world, not even one framed as a tentative thought.

Banfield interprets this section as a “bridge” between self-contained moments that are literary analogues to scenes of painterly impressionism. In a larger argument that sees Woolf’s writing as under the influence of Russell’s conception of time, Banfield reads “Time Passes” as the “logical connector” that allows “fragmentary” moments to attain an abstract order and thus to overcome the impasse of impressionist representation as able only to capture sense-data haphazardly and disjointedly. The continuity of Woolf’s novel, she argues, is forged through an almost mathematical formalism in which discrete “temporal units” are arranged into a series that includes intervals between its elements. This structural analysis, which recognizes a temporal lapse only insofar as it plays a functional role in guaranteeing the coherence of an underlying pattern, forecloses a reading of “Time Passes” as enacting a more radical interruption of the order that preceeds over the first and third parts—one that, to borrow from Benjamin’s 1921 reflections on the general strike, disrupts a continuist schema that upholds the very notion of an end succeeding the means of arrival.

It is important to remember that the eradication of subjectivity is not total, as many commentators suggest. Toward the end of “Time Passes,” Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast, whose names are not once mentioned elsewhere in the book, arrive in order to carry out the laborious work of readying the house for the Ramsays’ return. If the section effects a reversal of the relative emphasis given to subjects over objects—and correspondingly, social over natural history—this revolution must also be understood to precipitate a class inversion. The section attends to and is occasionally focalized by the otherwise invisible cast of domestic workers as they set out on a major undertaking that will ultimately produce (only) stasis. Their labor, in other words, does not unfold within a temporal trajectory that culminates in an artifact’s production or an odyssey’s completion, but their act of maintenance generates a sense of continuity for the summer home’s bourgeois occupants, who “expected to find things as they had left them” (TL 139). Their task is to make everything seem as it was—a labor of the extra-narrative.

Commonly acknowledged are Woolf’s aesthetic predilection for moments of ordinary life and a complementary disinclination to subordinating her narratives to the structure of a dramatic arc. To read this interlude as another expression of her interest in private middle-class experience is to miss how “Time Passes” discloses not only how reproductive labor falls out of the order of the event but is also left out of the larger antithesis of the event and the everyday, whose tension structures so much of modernist art. Their labor does not appear as part of the realm of the quotidian, but is the enabling condition of dailiness itself. The critical reception of Woolf has only confirmed the invisibility of such maintenance work as removed from the field cultural production—as outside the gendered division of labor that Woolf thematizes, an omission indicated by the scant airtime given to Mrs. McNab’s internal pronouncement, once the cleaning is complete: “it was finished” (TL 141).

29 Benjamin, GS2.2, 179-203.
The phrase appears verbatim at the novel’s end when Lily, having “had [her] vision,” puts down her brush in fatigue. Lily’s line has been imbued with special significance, as it joins the work of narrative closure with the female artist’s achievement. But perhaps we can read her pronouncement not as the final word but as a re-inscription of an already accomplished work. If her repetition establishes manual and artistic labor as parallel, it also drives the two domains apart: Mrs. McNab’s “it was finished” does not eventuate the text’s end but, less momentously, restores the stage on which the artist will bring about closure by completing her production.

It may be worth considering how different Auerbach’s reading would have been had he drawn his excerpt from the middle section of To the Lighthouse instead of the first. Auerbach posits a mimetic affiliation between, on the one hand, modern literature’s confidence that any fragment “plucked from the course of a life” will be able capture the totality of that fate, and, on the other, his own philological method, which involves careful attention to the small snippet, which, in the right hands, could yield far more than any comprehensive overview of an author’s life and work (M 547). As in psychoanalysis, there is trust that the chance of selection—of a passage, of an utterance chosen simply because it lies at the tip of association—will be able to deliver something essential about the object of inquiry. It is the singularly unrepresentative quality of “Time Passes” that is of interest here—the way in which it is unable to regarded as exemplary of the novel and proves intransigent to a critical method that seeks to reconcile the well-chosen fragment with the totality of which it is a part. This lyric interlude does belong to the novel, but only insofar as it acts as the latter’s own, unintegrated self-estrangement.

IV. Dingsprache and the Elegy of Translation

Shawls & shooting caps. A green handled brush. / The devouringess of nature. / But all the time, this passes, accumulates. / Darkness. / The welter of winds & the waves / What then is the medium through wh. We regard human beings? / Tears.

— Woolf, excerpt from an early sketch of “Time Passes”30

To be named… perhaps always remains an intimation of mourning.

— Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”

(GS2.2. 151; SW 73)

While composing To the Lighthouse, Woolf speculates that she is in need of something to supplant “the novel” as a generic category. She goes on to wonder if a more suitable term for the project underway might be elegy (D3 34). It is difficult to say definitively for whom this elegy is written. If there is a lamentation in these pages, it is a lamentation five times over. The death of Mrs. Ramsay marks a maternal loss. The sudden passing of two children—Andrew, who is hit by a shell during combat, and Prue, who dies while giving birth—are untimely familial fatalities. Metonymically, Andrew’s death is drawn into relation to a broader generational loss—the other “twenty or thirty” imprecisely countable casualties that the Great War has claimed. And, more abstractly, there is a

30 Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 375.
lament that time itself is irrevocably gone. There is a fifth dimension of elegy, which is neither directly narratable nor able to be pinned to a discrete lost object. It cannot be apprehended without a view of the novel taken as a whole, for it does not correspond to a referential occurrence—a diegetic happening—but is generated by the novel’s structure and the bind introduced by its self-splitting into irreconcilable parts.

Something of this elegiac current within Woolf’s work is illuminated when read alongside Benjamin’s 1916 essay, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” [Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen]. Perhaps it is not unfounded to propose that these two pieces be read as each other’s interlinear translation. For they both dispel, in their singular ways, the critical impasse between a position anchored by the refusal of extra-linguistic referentiality (a textual outside), and a rejection of the primacy of the linguistic on the basis of its inadequacy for apprehending what is irreducible to what is culturally determined. This alternative way of theirs consists of three elements: a break with instrumental writing and a disarticulation of language from the expression of human interiority; a shift in language’s relation to the “mute” object-world from that of denotation to translation, where translation is set free from the obligation to transmit content “faithfully”; third, an acknowledgement of the incommensurability between human and extra-anthropic orders of language. The fracture between what can be conveyed in word and what the word occludes occasions the work of elegy.

In an early iteration of a theory of language that became a lifelong preoccupation, Benjamin posits the existence of Dingsprache [thing-language]. It is certainly a perplexing word, for it demands that we unhinge our notion of language from human speech. Throughout the essay, Benjamin pushes us to abandon the presumption that linguistic production is exclusive to the anthropic domain; and further, to recognize the incompatibility between a linguistic order forged by human convention and thing-languages that “issue from matter.” A critical moment upholds this affirmation, since attunement to inhuman communication requires a prior recognition of the “invalidity and emptiness” of “the bourgeois conception of language,” which holds that “the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being. The other conception of language, in contrast, knows no means, no object, and no addressee” (G.52 144; SW1 65). In a rather startling moment of the essay, Benjamin denounces what seem to be basic, if not fundamental, assumptions about language. When I speak these words, is this not language? Even when enunciated in solitude, is communication not always addressed, at least potentially, to another? Would one really be mistaken in believing that language becomes fullest when it partakes in the transmission of meaningful content?

Benjamin works to defy the reduction of language to denotative functionalism. He distinguishes Dingsprache from the presumption that a word can designate a thing, and in so doing, effectively communicate its being. The communication of things is not an anthropic achievement. It does not occur, as Russell’s theory of descriptions might have it, when someone picks out entity by saying, this is a lamp, and this is a lamprocapnos spectabilis. Rather, messages [Mitteilungen] are generated from the object-world itself, even while they may not take to form of words. In setting things free from our denotative hold on them, Benjamin challenges the notion that humans have a monopolistic claim to language and suggests that linguistic expression is not encompassed by the coordinates of human agency. In her 1927 essay, “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” Woolf similarly expresses a desire to “free” prose “from the beast-of-burden work which so many novelists necessarily lay upon it, of
carrying loads of details, bushels of fact.”\textsuperscript{31} The captive animal becomes the figural double of an instrumentalized language, a writing reduced to the compulsion of an author, who outsources the labor of shouldering facticity. Woolf evokes a scene of interspecies subjugation out of which emerges an aesthetic aspiration—to emancipate prose, yoked here to an animal body, from its condition of servility.

For Woolf and Benjamin, questions regarding the limits of linguistic expression open onto an affective domain of the lament. While new aesthetic possibilities emerge from the re-conception of language as non-coincident with the sphere of human production, this undertaking also sets into motion the work of grief, which arises from the eclipse of the object-world by modern culture (where \textit{eclipse} bears all the meanings of its etymological root, including “leaving out,” “forsaking,” engendering a “failure to appear”).\textsuperscript{32} For Benjamin, the postlapsarian conversion of language into a means, “a mere sign” that posits an accidental relation to the object, results in a garrulousness and “overprecision” that takes on a tragic character:

\begin{quote}
Im Verhältnis der Menschensprachen zu der der Dinge liegt etwas, was man als „überbenennung“ annähernd bezeichnen kann: über- benennung als tiefster sprachlicher Grund aller Traurigkeit und (vom Ding aus betrachtet) allen Verstummens. (GS2 155)

[There is, in the relation of human languages to that of things, something that can be approximately described as ‘overnaming’ the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) for all falling into silence.] (\textit{SW'}} 73)\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

What takes place in Benjamin’s aside—“from the point of view of the thing” [vom Ding aus betrachtet]—is a perspectival shift that draws us back to Woolf’s stated intention to write a book whose principle characters are household objects. Woolf’s candlestick may be said to keep company with Benjamin’s lamp, which he suggests imparts its mental contents to humans. “This is not anthropomorphism,” he insists emphatically in the shortest sentence of the essay. Both Benjamin and Woolf endeavor to make a place for what, in the post-Enlightenment West, has been banished to children’s literature or to the archive of lyric conceits—namely, non-anthropic points of view. Point of view here is more than a point of light that constitutes the human subject as looked at in the visual field (Lacan/Sartre); nor is perspective merely one within a set of possible structural positions in homogenous space, a notion that Banfield associates with Russell’s epistemology and by extension, Woolf’s fiction. A more capacious, if not idiosyncratic, conception of point of view, understands it as a conduit for imagining experience that is not exclusively refracted through the focal point of human subjectivity. This entails a more radical sense of what is conventionally understood to fall under the heading of Woolf’s multiperspectivalism.

Scientific nomenclature is an exemplar of the kind of “prattle” that Benjamin describes. The unremitting marking of things by force of a linguistic sign becomes the ground of Traurigkeit [sorrow], since the loquacity of human speech overdetermines that which it identifies and admits nature only insofar as it falls silent before the name it has been given. “To be named,” Benjamin


\textsuperscript{32} “Eclipse, v.” \textit{OED Online}. Oxford University Press.

\textsuperscript{33} Translation modified.
speculates, “perhaps always remains an intimation of mourning” (GS 2 155; SW 173). Echoes of Benjamin’s sentiment can be heard decades later, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which recapitulates Benjamin’s ideas about language but desacralizes them by replacing the Edenic fall with the advent of capitalist modernity. Language, once it is understood as sign instead of a likeness, becomes an instrument of calculation that makes a claim to know nature, at the cost of renouncing its resemblance to it. This fatal estrangement produces language as knowledge but also condemns to muteness all that the word does miss.

Unlike accounts that hypostatize what is real as mind-independent, and unlike Bill Brown’s definition of the thing as what is latent or in excess of an “object,” and thus always inaccessible, Benjamin suggests that thing-language and the name-language of humankind are not irremediably withdrawn from each other. Between them, transit can be made by translation, as when what is mute “passes into” name. His interest in naming as a quasi-volitional endeavor resurfaces some years later in the following remark: “The language of a translation can—in fact, must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the intention of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself” (SW 1 260). In place of a notion of translation as the transmission of content from a source to a target language, he envisions it as a gesture of self-ceding, a relinquishing of the voice so that it can speak what it receives from without.

In redacted form, Benjamin and Woolf re-envision language as content-less, translational, and elegiac. Their insistence on taking distance from rational, communicable content might readily be interpreted as confirmation of high modernism’s aesthetic of formalism, with its rarefied values of difficulty. This emptiness, however, derives not from abstraction for abstraction’s sake, nor from a commitment to the autonomy of the literary work. Rather, this vacancy is way, as it were, to allow language to quiet down and to put its ear to what falls outside of human speech. In other words, they attempt to restore to language a receptive capacity that can only be achieved by shedding its own faculty of spontaneity and holding in check its role as the executor of intention. These ideas taken together are nearly impossible to enact without residue. This impossibility comprises a fundamental tension within their prose, which can never entirely divest itself of sense nor of its own interventionism. Nonetheless, the lineaments of this effort can be traced, as it manifests in Woolf’s prose, which, like Benjamin’s exposition in “On Language as Such,” often either verges on anthropomorphism or, as we saw earlier, empties content from itself so thoroughly that it scarcely seems to say anything. Here, the narrator is less disposed to transmitting content about the abandoned objects than to turning an ear toward what they, wordlessly, might ask of one another:

> At length, desisting, all ceased together, gathered together, all sighed together; all together gave off an aimless gust of lamentation to which some door in the kitchen replied; swung wide; admitted nothing; and slammed to. (TL 127)

Would it be possible to read this moment as anything but pathetic fallacy? Could a lamentation truly issue from the door? To be sure, the war is raging on, in both “Time Passes” and while Benjamin is writing his essay. But what conventional literary analysis would diagnose as a mere projection of human anguish onto the oikos is perhaps an attempt not to impose symbolism onto an otherwise

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blank externality but to register how the loss engendered by such large-scale violence, whose technological precondition was the mastery of nature, is not restricted to the anthropic horizon. What is imagined is the possibility of inhuman mourning and a language that would be able, without aspiring to faithful transcription, to translate grief that lies outside of the ambit of human language. Benjamin writes:


[…] all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language (though “to endow with language” is more than “to make able to speak”). This proposition has a double meaning. It means, first, that she would lament language itself. Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature…. This proposition means, second, that she would lament. Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language. It contains scarcely more than the sensuous breath; and even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament. Because she is mute, nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness of nature makes her mute. In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate.] (GS2 155; SW1 73)

What may seem a tautological construction is in fact a double proposition: incommunicability is grief, and grief incommunicability. To be without speech gives rise to mournfulness, and the inarticulacy of the lament delivers lament back from expression into speechlessness. It is only in light of this dual insight, and with view of the three parts of the To the Lighthouse together, that the fifth sense of the elegiac character of Woolf’s novel can be registered.

The shift between “Time Passes” and its neighboring sections is not merely stylistic but effects a structural adjustment by which what is secondary becomes central and what was ground becomes figure. In The One vs. the Many, Alex Woloch argues that the Victorian novel is constituted by the struggle to reconcile the tension between a drive toward social inclusiveness and a humanist commitment to fictional interiority. The realist form emerges out of the competing impulses to draw into a novelistic world a multitude of characters and, at the same time, to bring out the inner life of a single protagonist. The solution to this problem, he suggests, is found in an asymmetrical structure of characterization, one in which many characters are represented, but the flow of attention is diverted toward a central figure. 37 Unlike its Victorian predecessors, To the Lighthouse offers no compromise formation, in which minor and major are arranged in a stable but uneven

distribution of narrative space. Nor is the novel merely an instance of the “difficult aesthetic principle”—one that Jameson identifies in the work of Conrad, Bloomsbury, and Joyce—which brings about the transvaluation of the accidental detail into what is momentous, the minor part into a heroic role. On the contrary, the disparate sections of the novel precipitate a categorical shift between incompatible orders of intelligibility—a shift that cannot be assimilated to the narrative horizon of final reversal or accomplished redemption.

In “Time Passes” we do not, as in Mrs. Dalloway, witness the vicissitudes of personal time so much as we are exposed to the more radically different inhuman temporalities that are unquantified and unquantifiable. As calendric time accelerates, the forward momentum of narrative nearly comes to a standstill. In this shortest portion of the book, the longest period elapses: we later learn that in a handful of pages ten years have elapsed, and in the rest of the book, two days. Untethered to any consciousness, the deictics “here” and “now” cannot be placed. The chronoscope breaks down.

It is hard to find one’s bearings because the distributional matrix of attention is so drastically skewed. The actors who would normally occupy center stage recede to the margins, along with the decisive events that befal them. This is nowhere more harshly felt than in this devastating report, issued in the subordinate clause of a bracketed sentence:

[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.] (TL 128)

The magnitude of this loss is amplified, not only because the event of death is omitted and missed, but also because it is improperly registered—a redoubling of a loss because it cannot be experienced as such. It is not just that primary and secondary aspects of the novel are compete for attention; there is a contest between the very schema that uphold the distinction between major and minor. In “Time Passes,” the bit part is not converted into the primary actor, but the section adopts a wholly different optic by which to adjudicate the relative significance of characters, and what, furthermore, is eligible to be a character.

It would be a blunder to enshrine “Time Passes” as a state of exception in which things are finally liberated into agency once human will is sent off-stage. For we are not left to dwell in this inverted world. After this profound interruption, the novel abruptly returns to business as usual. The house is prepared for use, and we resume the normative protocol of the bourgeois world that was established in the first part. To the Lighthouse performs the work of a camera obscura: an illuminated scene (pt. I) is drawn through a dark, small passage that yields an (ideologically) inverted image (pt. II), which is then re-projected right side up (pt. III).

Taken as a whole, the novel is structured by the reciprocal inversion of free indirect discourse and writing in absentia, interiority and impersonality. As “Time Passes” draws to a close, just before the Ramsays make their return, a last orchestral refrain can be heard:

And now as if the cleaning and the scrubbing and the scything and the mowing had drowned it, there rose that half-heard melody, that intermittent music which the ear half catches but lets fall; a bark, a bleat; irregular, intermittent, yet somehow related;

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the hum of an insect, the tremor of cut grass, dissevered yet somehow belonging; the jar of a doorbeetle, the squeak of a wheel loud, low, but mysteriously related; which the ear strains to bring together and is always on the verge of harmonizing, but they are never quite heard, never fully harmonized, and at last, in the evening, one after another the sounds die out, and the harmony falters, and silence falls. (TL 141)

The music that issues from the speechless inhuman world and becomes momentarily and partially audible in “Time Passes” lapses back into a quietude, or in Benjamin’s words, verstummt. The silence is not absolute. It anticipates the arrival of the home’s residents and the reversion to a social order in which such a melody is consigned to ambience, if it is heard at all. Each of the novel’s parts precipitates a transformation whose technological analogue would be a sudden switch in audio channels, or in cinema, the rack focus, which adjusts the focal length so as to alter the relation between foreground and background without moving the position of the camera.

The final part, called “The Lighthouse,” returns to a re-illuminated world, in which nonhumans and domestic workers resume their station in the background of human affairs. But in the midst of this resumption of a normal course of things, this short subdivision erupts:

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[Macalister’s boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea.] (TL 180)

It is difficult to know how to read this. As it is positioned in the text, it interrupts Lily’s expression of anguish over Mrs. Ramsay’s death, and so, can be said to disrupt her normative trajectory of mourning. Throughout this novel, as elsewhere, Woolf has trained us into a commitment to the minor—partly by demanding that we read closely what is marked (typographically) as marginal. Do we give this passage diminished weight in relation to the surrounding text? Or, as we might have done with the news of Mrs. Ramsay’s death, do we apply the formula of interpretive inversion and read what is bracketed for omission as the bearer of what is most significant? If so, would this conversion not, then, prompt us to consider the death of the human and the mutilation of the fish as events on order of the same magnitude? And would that not then undermine, if not undo the very fabric of human exceptionalism, which authorized our initial impulse to elevate what the text minorizes? Whatever the case, a crisis emerges on this contestable terrain of the incidental.

While this difficulty is not to be resolved, it does crystallize a dissymmetry—namely that ontological assumptions structure the plane of figuration, while, on the contrary, experiments with the plane of figuration can envision, while they may be unable to actualize, alternative hierarchies of being. The contrast between “Time Passes” and the two sections that bookend it shows that it is possible to selectively render certain grammars of social being operable and others inoperable. The challenge presented by the novel is not, then, to imagine a world wholly severed from our own, but to come to terms with this co-presence, as well as the mutual incompatibility of these different sets of ontological possibilities, each of which entails the other’s grief.

It is precisely this sense elegy that seems still to be very much a cause for lament and very near to the heart of a radical political imagination.


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