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## 20. Benjamin Reading Kafka\*

### Kafka then and now

Kafka's unique work—unique in more than one sense—never brings to light anything but its own making, in progress; its status is not that of the already “made,” however carefully composed it may seem (even though the texts were often written in great haste). The strongest linguistic concentration tolerates the maintenance of a certain distance, as controlled as possible and astoundingly free.

More and more, we see this work today for what it is: a work thought out in literary terms, on the basis of readings—the say, fully situated in language, by language, and in language.

Kafka has not been—and could not have been—read in this framework until recently, however. [1] Today, readers are accepting the stories in their complexity and their strained polarity, while re-examining their difficulty, which is deliberately studied than had been thought: bolder, more critical, more experimental.

It is to *us*, with the new distance we possess, that the possibility of appreciating the original distance is offered, after a long time during which the texts began to emerge and came to be perceived as texts, then came to be understood and rediscovered; it has become possible to *read* them anew. It has taken about a hundred years to produce a prodigiously instructive history of the work. [2]

This reading-rereading frees itself from every purpose it has served, from everything that people have thought they could do and call, *ad nauseam*, Kafkaesque. The writer, relentlessly persistent in his nocturnal quest for writing, will continue to defend his exercises, more conquering than extravagant, against all odds, against distortions. He is no stranger to metamorphoses; he remains their master. Did he not put them at the core of his writing, in the thousand and one conquering a singular imaginary? In Kafka, broadenings of the horizon remain tied to the most meticulous precision; expression and reflection converge in the minuscule. The explorations exhaust themselves as they unwind; often, they peter out; if they fail in failure, it is because that is where they led.

Kafka expressed himself about everything around him. His wit, his acuity are attested; his persona is known to us. We have his notebooks, often already organized, his private diaries, all the notes he took, the abundance of letters he wrote. We have accounts by his friends. The testimony does not really touch on the writing; the world that was being built at his table was located elsewhere. There is no contradiction, obviously, between the two spheres, whether they are in communication between themselves or not, but one does not pass from one to the other ingenuously. One sphere is constructed in the vicinity; it could not have been built anywhere but there, in Prague, before, during, and after the war. The other sphere lies elsewhere: in the world of literature, precisely.

Kafka's narratives belong to a profoundly scriptural universe; they all seek to please before they seek to convince. They exploit. Their success is all the more striking in that themes of failure are not only taken into account in them but constitute almost to the point of excess, a kind of counterpoint to an unshakeable base. The style and even the echoes that the descriptions bring to life are anchored there; this is the secret of the transformations that particularize them. The pleasure taken in reading them is of a strange nature; it is jarring, but it remains nonetheless literary and perfectly free.

In 1931, under the title “Von den Gleichnissen” (On Parables), Max Brod published a conversation on parables. [3] The conversation bears on profit. The author of the parables has transformed himself into a parable. Yes, we have profited, but the profit lies elsewhere; the interlocutor says with dismay. He is corrected: No, it is here that we profit, in everyday reality; that there, in the counter-part, logic would have it that everything is lost, by virtue of having become the object of pure reflection. This correlation is found everywhere; it brings us necessarily from being to non-being.

### Benjamin's Kafka

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Walter Benjamin’s essay on Kafka dates from 1934. [4] It was one of the most important and the most carefully studied the critic ever wrote; it is situated closer to Kafka’s time than to ours, and thus further from him than it should have been effectively does distancing do its work, before it is diminished. Kafka’s work made an impression on its earliest readers, does on readers even today, by dint of its difference and its singularity, but especially by its sheer force; its literary quality sustained it and ensured a presence for it. The power of the writing imposed its effect of presence or even self-evidence before the text’s meaning and scope could come into view. It was not a matter of the “meaning” of Kafka’s writings.

At the time Benjamin was writing, there were the seven books, short and precious, that had appeared in Kafka’s lifetime before 1924. In these volumes a good number of the densest, most polished and best known of his writings appear. It is a period, probably the most representative, despite being quite slim; it is pertinent in its own right, despite the inevitable reticence on the part of the author, prodigious without affectation, more concerned with his creations than with their dissemination. The writer’s qualities were received as a contribution to expressionism, so disconcerting were they; then were gradually discovered in their true originality and their uniqueness. [5] All of Kafka—the real one—was there. In a second phase, there followed the surprising mass of what was published after his death by his friend, Max Brod, the executor of his will, who, since their student years together, had more or less anticipated the task that awaited him. He was like the evangelist he introduced the three novels: the oldest, *Amerika*, written between September 1912 and January 1913, came out in 1925 after *The Trial* (1925) and after *The Castle* (1926), which had been written last, in 1922. The volumes of previously unavailable texts show that the unpublished work, the whole literary estate, was animated (from 1907 on) by almost ceaseless creative activity, a virtually limitless momentum, essentially oscillating, stopping sometimes but never losing its way. The continuous work was found in the intervals: the suspensions were lodged in a feverish movement of accomplishment.

Later, there was to be a third period, in which reflection, always renewed, on the resources and demands of writing would become still more widely available to the public, in large part after Benjamin’s death. The focus now was on the self and its vicissitudes, as well as on the worlds that surround and bind us. This was yet another overture; in its aftermath, other styles mingled with the rich personal diaries. Then came the series of letters, with their accounts of encounters and long engagements, begun again and again with numerous partners: love and what opposed it, life and non-life. Benjamin, in had set out, as best he could, to mark the importance of the complements and the supplements that had just appeared; he surely had an intimation of the scope of all the rest, with which he was yet unfamiliar.

Six years earlier, on July 21, 1925, describing his readings, Benjamin told Gershom Scholem that he had requested some of Kafka’s posthumous texts for the purpose of reviewing them, adding that the short story “Before the Law” now struck him as if it had ten years earlier (the collection in which the text appeared had been published in 1919!), as “one of the most beautiful in the German language.” [7] Later, he wrote to Scholem that he should have purchased everything (he hadn’t received the texts he sought to review). He didn’t have either *The Castle* or *Amerika*, “to say nothing of the rare, out-of-print *Meditation* [*Betrachtung*]”; this 1913 volume was the only one published during Kafka’s lifetime that Benjamin lacked. [8] Ten years later, taken literally, it would have been “The Judgment” (1913). Or “Metamorphosis” (1915)? Did Benjamin become attached to Kafka posteriori but explicitly, to the early Kafka?

## The outline of the Essay

He did not read him. But did anyone read? He read in his own way, as others read in theirs. He knew Kafka; the acquaintance was perhaps more recent than he indicated. He had penetrated into the work as if, owing to the disconcerting singularity of it, somehow perceived there, he had to retranslate it. Kafka’s greatness could be grasped by Benjamin in an irrational fashion; that way, it became interpretable, and could be situated. This global vision did not allow Benjamin to recognize the power of the gaze on the things of this world, on opinions and beliefs. The world’s unpredictability and absurdity struck him as too powerful to be attributable to art, to be constructed by and to emanate from an artist, a mind, or an individual.

Kafka’s work was called to communicate a message on the history of humankind; it was a remote origin that Benjamin charged with unveiling in his place, in his capacity as a socially engaged literary figure. Not only did this entail not reading the text in its original form, it entailed reading what was thought to be there. In Kafka’s case, Benjamin should have been interested in an individual author and an original creation, but his theoretical approach linked Kafka to a collective experience. The essayist constructed a framework that allowed him to situate what he retained from his reading, on a vast background supplied by the work. He had to project onto a past his own construct, a discourse considered inspiring and instructive, a missionary in its import; it was a message that had come from an unknown and unknowable source. The text was translated into a religious structure and was then reread through that framework, with the transformations required by the operation. The text was endowed with a social context that corresponded to the discourse and gave it its meaning. This discourse was half-projected into a history, enlarged to a mythical anthropology, and half-constructed, closer to a theological or philosophical theory.

This is how the discourse spoke to him, to him and his readers; this is how it became expressive. One held onto what it

say, what one was to draw from it. Once projected onto this new terrain, the author under scrutiny no longer retained the liberty he had taken, faced with a tradition he knew well, in order to express himself as he had done before. For the essential contrast, the reorganization of the subject matter was the way the work, interpreted and newly situated, was adapted to the political situation and became intelligible and meaningful. Although the Essay outlined stages in an evolution, it is probably possible to find in it an actual philosophy of history. Continuity is lacking. The evolution toward a classless society provides a context that made it possible to categorize the flashes of messianism uncovered in Kafka. The more welcoming and eclectic speculation of anthropology had opened up to the politically opposed paths traced by such authors as Ludwig Klages, “cosmic” and conservative revolution.

Some claim that Benjamin read Kafka as a philologist; he was indeed attentive to detail. [9] Did he succeed in putting his readers off the scent? In reality, he was not intent on deciphering Kafka according to his own logic, which was surprisingly precise; he believed he understood Kafka as he interpreted him, more “naturally”; he naturalized him. Starting in his early years, so thoroughly researched by Marino Pulliero, [10] Benjamin found himself in a context in which philology (the dominant discipline in the nineteenth century) and its claims to restitution were less appreciated than before. The response to this decline did not consist in examining the prerequisites to the type of reading practiced; instead, a recasting of the work’s content was substituted for the work itself. Proceeding on this path, Benjamin would ultimately deem Kafka’s writings incomprehensible. This was because he could not understand them, reading the way he read. He scrutinized the work—was familiar to him and which impressed him—according to the principles of a foreign schema, set up from a distance. Stéphane Mosès saw this clearly, although he did not limit himself to the written text either. He mortgaged it—in a different way, to be sure—by introducing formal figures of composition that he borrowed from the formalist theories of literary writing. To that end, he identified limited entities in these structures that could guide the reader. [11]

Not in connection with Kafka, but in the discussion of the subject, connected and no less primordial, constituted by his reading of Baudelaire, [12] Benjamin commented on the place of philology (he refers explicitly to the practice of interpreting ancient authors), singling out the magical element that surrounds it and that philological interpretation is called upon to exorcise. The text does not escape from the hold of this magic, but communicates its charm, tying it to the astonishment that is its eminent *object* of this type of knowledge. The remedy then lies in the historical perspective, which repositions the object as a monad, as an enlivening agency. The mythic rigidity of pure textual facticity will thus be surmounted and extended into connection with our own historical experience. One sees clearly that Benjamin does not grasp the ability of the text to speak for itself by means of a perspective that is constructed in it. He isolates a language effect that, however refined it may be, is to be related to a wider constellation.

One must consider the sometimes deviant paths that he follows in the Essay, which he views as its own genre. The flow of free demonstration comes to shed light with a new lens, broader and more “metaphysical.” The raw material is borrowed from the author. For Benjamin, what is at stake is not a text that one would have to read in order to understand it, but rather a text containing a sacred message with multiple meanings, modeled on the Bible and on contemporary practices. The treatment moves away from its object. Updating that makes use of revised Marxist categories doubtless plays an essential role; the reader’s gaze necessarily has to adjust to it. The term “parable,” which Kafka himself questioned, [14] and which is frequently used to designate his narratives, might not be adequate either if one privileges the path of a symbolic interpretation, available and transferable. The “parable” as commonly understood is notably lacking in Kafka’s compositions. His narrations are constructed. Kafka tells stories in a new way; their aesthetic form is specific to him. The exploration, in each instance particular and unexpected, is entirely determined.

The Essay, prepared and thought through over a long period of time, followed its own rules and thus took liberties. Benjamin went to Kafka, [15] then he came back with his plunder; he had started out with his own ideas, if not his own system. He *could not* have had an equivalent in the object, which would have resisted them. As an experienced reader, Benjamin took Kafka’s originality into account in spite of everything. Certain specificities were undeniable, but Benjamin integrated even these features into the preconceptions of his own vision; this vision was charged with welcoming them, not shedding light on them. [16] The Essay, as such, develops by following a demonstrative line; it does not lend itself to an exercise of elucidation and it cannot be reduced to a summary of what is gleaned from a reading. It has its own logic. A genuine reading would have been troubling for Benjamin. It is thus appropriate to study the Essay as an autonomous product, according to the rules of the genre, and to discover its rhythm, which results from a particular composition. It does not lead to Kafka, and Kafka does not lead to it. To be sure, this is troubling for us. What views are we to adopt? To what are we to relate this text?

The author studied would be invited, rather, to introduce himself a posteriori, in the Essay, and to take on meaning in that context. Something has appeared in the writer’s writings, and has attracted the attention of the critic; this element cannot occupy a place assigned to it by the interpreter. [17] We must recall that Benjamin treated Kafka’s work as a whole, speaking in the mode of the usual approaches, which were most often religious; they were, in fact, applications—and Benjamin’s, in spite of everything, was no different. His voice would have been his own only if it had been allowed to develop in the form created in each instance by the narrative. However, Benjamin distances himself from such transpositions, in which the

channels reflection in and of itself, with its own means; for him the work is charged with translating a historical state of society. It neither reflects nor problematizes further; it serves to attest or confirm a hypothesis of a general nature. At Benjamin passes from one terrain to the other without warning the reader and without explaining what Kafka furnished elaboration of the theory or, conversely, what the theory supplied to the writer's reading. Problematization, always partial and begun anew in Kafka, is scrapped. For Benjamin, it is a matter of revealing, through Kafka, the existence of a timeless experience of humankind, a truth that no one in the world could deny. In this way, universality becomes a reality; at the time, in contrast, it de-intellectualizes very powerfully, through Benjamin's failure to consider the reflective and interrogatory import of the contexts exploited.

## The composition of the Essay

The Essay is divided into four parts. The first, "Potemkin," is organized around an old story identified by Benjamin that prefigures Kafka. It presents characters at first broken down and shackled, later all-powerful, in the enclosed courtyard building. Via this presentation, the reader enters into a detailed accounting of the stories. The creatures are the accusing fathers; they wallow in filth and hide behind their stooges and acolytes. The laws, kept secret, go back to the time of a prehistoric world, which the young women, in their complicity, bring back to life. Family and administrations are merged; the onlookers are freed from them; this is the world of the assistants, who have not been able to break their ties, but who have hope. With them, it is easier to return to a past that is restructured into ages of the world, the time before myth and time after; they regain access to music, singing.

The second section, "A Childhood Photograph," also takes its impetus from a vision, the photographer's workshop. Dreams are embodied there; they lead to America and to the other (the "third") novel—which comes last only in the order of reality. This is the world of the theater, the runway of an unfettered chase, the discovery of the Chinese supremacy of gesture. Nothing is described any longer, no group; everything is in action. Kafka's stories, in their form, are to be read according to their own code, which is gestural; this is how their strangeness is explained (on this point, Benjamin is very close to interpreters such as Kraft or Brod). With theatricality, a boundary is crossed: the idea unifies the entire section. Then Benjamin pulls away: the attempt to grasp the form becomes complicated; it blossoms like a poem, which it is not, nor is it a parable. The doctrine to which it might refer does not appear. Benjamin attempts to put the problem of social organization at the center (this suits his purposes), and we are thus brought back to China (where we remain; as with Bertolt Brecht, the milieu is Chinese). The critic takes a stance, opting for enigma. The parable remains indecipherable. Kafka has done his utmost to prevent exegesis. We are still at the theater, playing out our existence, our leave-taking, our departure. In the last scene we are back at the village at the foot of the castle. We now know, thanks to the Talmud, that we are dealing with the body (is that however, an exegesis?).

The third section, "The Little Hunchback," begins again with a story (by Hamsun) that we approach expansively. We are still in Brecht's China. But the decisive step concerns the interpretation that had been excluded previously; this is the doxographical moment when theology prevails. Benjamin argues and refutes. It is as if he had to make a clean slate of his reading to rediscover the forces of the prehistoric world that survive, secularized. Guilt reflects the state of the world, and messianic judgment (deliverance) is the object of constant deferral. Kafka has withdrawn rationally, leaving the parable with its multiple appearance. Criticism then intervenes. Kafka, in gesture, has limited himself to the timeless, to the ages of the world. The primary promiscuity is forgotten, but it remains present. The theme imposes itself, with the return of swamps and the return of women from the first section. Doesn't *The Trial* dissolve into oblivion? The doxography opens onto the god of the Jews who remembers. Animals forget, but they rummage in their feelings and find anguish there, the sign of a lost hope. The star figures have an ancestral model; it is an originary image, the little hunchback, in Odradek and everywhere, a master of "disfigured life"; the hunchback leads to the swamps and to all the buried knowledge. Kafka is reconnected with the broader possible trans-ethnic experience.

The fourth section, "Sancho Panza," starts once again with a parable-story, in the spirit of Kafka's Hasidic world. Such is Benjamin's view, as he connects it with the story of life's brevity. [18] These stories have to do with time and bring us back once again to the strange beings—madmen, or students—who live out oblivion or await deliverance. He brings together the situations in which extreme agitation is juxtaposed with the void of Lao-Tse. The actors from Oklahoma have been freed; students are not free. Perhaps fragments of Kafka's existence unwittingly recall this world of gestures, the way modern man remains alienated while watching movies or listening to recordings. The experience of modernity and its negativity allow us to feel the breath of the prehistoric world, which has come all the way here, marked by the return of Bucephalus accompanying the death of the conqueror, traversing history and finding himself again in the story being told. Kraft wanted to see in the advent of justice after the myth. Benjamin disagreed. Alexander's horse remains faithful to his mystical origin; he simply does not exercise his right. With study, one reconnects with the authority of the writing. Benjamin finally takes this step, including the tradition. We are on the threshold of justice. But tradition does not keep its promises; there remain only the books in which Sancho Panza has Don Quixote do what he, Benjamin, reads in them.

...

Kafka did not answer the questions he had been asked; and no one asked him the questions to which the stories would respond, the ones that the stories inspired in the first place. It is a vicious circle. The exegesis of the narrations has been hugely diversified, [19] but it has not often come close to the meaning, which was freely developed there. Benjamin can himself of the idea that Kafka, in what he describes, was referring to something other than what one supposes, something must have been a truth close to those that directed his own historical speculations. In the end, it is theological in nature if it is aligned with the history of the world—looking back, in the construction of a mythical origin, as well as looking ahead toward a utopia or a messianic deliverance. Not that he failed to situate theology, from his own standpoint; in his essay language, for example, he wrote: “the highest mental being, as it appears in religion, rests solely on man and on the land in him.” [20] For the origin, one is dealing with an inaccessible tradition, which one can replace as one sees fit. This track will be fragmented and more or less amorphous—and will always be something, better than nothing. It is as though they were waiting for the space to be occupied. Benjamin asserts insistently that Kafka is aiming at a future. In fact, Kafka does not “aim” at anything of the sort. It would be more accurate to say that he does not aim, that he raises questions, instead, about what one aims at and why.

Another feature of the Essay concerns the writer. Kafka ought to be treated as a subject, with his own perspectives; for Benjamin, it is a question of a higher necessity, to which the writer is “subjected.” The reference to the tale (“Märchen”) in the Essay, and to popular wisdom, helps reinforce a search for authenticity. A truth deposited in the tradition comes to confirm a hypothesis advanced by historical or anthropological speculation. Benjamin notes, furthermore, that Kafka and Proust have in common the ego that governs their writings, an ego so transparent that everyone can assimilate it or leave it behind at will. [21] He does not see the freedom that the writing creates for itself; reflexive, it is situated outside of psychology, revealing a system and referring to psychology only while at the same time abolishing it.

## Scholem’s messianism and Benjamin’s

In the exchange of letters between Benjamin and Scholem, the discussion of Kafka goes back quite far, although not to the very beginning of their friendship. [22] It coincides with the first breakthrough of Kafka’s work, still marginal nevertheless, intellectual and literary consciousness in Germany. [23] Benjamin constituted for himself something like a prehistory of reception, a mythical past, pushing it back in time beyond the point of plausibility—a form proper to an era of sacralization. The fact remains that the two friends shared a discovery; it left them with a very powerful impression, and they tried to integrate it, each into his own world. They were each “interpellated,” no doubt separately, from the start. Interest in Kafka markedly after the publication of the novels. It was in the area of this common interest, around Judaism, and of their divergences, against a background of undeniable dissension, at once disguised and evaded, that the preparation of the book took shape, before 1934. There was an enigma to decipher. Intuition guided the two friends, united in the common search for a mediation that would orient their critique. From our standpoint, they were mistaken not to focus on the writing; presumably they were unable to do so.

But what did Scholem think? He was the first to take a stand. The stakes were considerable; the thing had to be said. In Jerusalem, he composed a poem (Benjamin too, in his correspondence, occasionally used that form [24] ) addressed to the city in the finest German, fourteen stanzas, quatrains composed in the grandiloquence of a no doubt restrained faith; a Rönnefeldt tradition was transferred into the post-war Judeo-German world. [25] One might say that he was trying, a century after the fact, to oppose Heine, who had been excluded from Judea. The profession of faith is intended to be absolute. Yes, there is revelation first; yes, there is the Last Judgment at the end, and the law that prepares us for it (whether he, Scholem, a historian who is a Zionist or a Zionist who is a historian, has personally followed the law or not). Benjamin connects the data provided by the text; he transfers them while retaining the framework.

The conflict was set off by Asja Lacis, the friend Benjamin met in Capri, and it was powerfully rekindled by Bertolt Brecht’s presence at her side. Benjamin was staying with him in Skovsbostrand, Denmark, during the summer of 1934, as he was in later years. [26] On this occasion, he was confronted with the essential, the prerequisites, which concerned a Jewish Zionism. Scholem insisted on reminding them (without discussion or nuance) that this author was a “Zionist” like himself and like Kafka. (The latter’s work is still viewed today as the business of the Israeli state, as is shown by the problems encountered on the matter of the autograph manuscripts bequeathed to the descendants of Brod’s secretary.) Kafka, an attentive observer of the situation in Prague, was of course nothing of the sort, despite his interest in the movement and in the problems that have given rise to it, whatever may have been said about him. [27] He was neither that nor anything else, or else he was ever all together; nor was he a denier of any outcome whatsoever. Rather, everything remained dependent on a reflective dialectic that expressed itself in its own structures. The transformation that takes place in his stories develops the logic appropriate to the narrative in each case; the facts are put to the test, analyzed in a construction.

Kafka was not an assimilated Jew, unlike others in the milieu in which he lived in Prague. His friends, close or distant, were

the most part Jews. He consistently followed the ups and downs produced by their internal divergences and their social difficulties, which increased after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. [28] One would thus have to say that he worked as a Jew, analyzing his own experience. In no case can one say that the work was conceived by him as testimony in favor of Judaism or of some religious tradition. His words presuppose all possible belongings. He claims none; on the contrary, he excludes them.

Written far from religious conflicts and commitments, the chapter Bernard Lahire devotes to the cultural situation of the integrates Kafka into the German-speaking milieu, without neglecting the very virulent ancient and recent anti-Semitism Czech side as well as on the German side. [29] The excerpts from the letters addressed to Milena, who was not Jewish complete lucidity about the precarious status of an "Occidental Jew" and Kafka's interest in the minorities that surround each group with its own language: the increasingly numerous Czechs, the Jews of Eastern Europe, and the prevalence Yiddish mean that Hebrew itself and Zionism can be situated in a single vast sphere of distancings, which ultimately accentuates the contradiction of his own status as a Jew.

When Kafka's unpublished writings were presented on the radio in 1931, Benjamin consulted his friend Scholem. In Jerusalem the latter had gone ahead and made his own position clear. He made a breakthrough that shed light on an entire state of mind and a prejudice. Kafka's place was not within the continuity of German literature; he belonged to Judaism (Scholem did anticipate the writer's universal success). He had to be reconnected to the Bible, to Job, and to the theme of the possible God's judgment (*Gottesurteil*): "I consider that that is the sole object of Kafka's production" [30]. He spoke out aggressively against Benjamin and against Brecht before him. Kafka's language, his prose, becomes clear only in the canonical light of the Last Judgment. "The world is expressed [in Kafka] in a language in which no redemption can be anticipated." [31] The reader is opposing the Christian theologians.

Scholem connected his Zionism to the Jewish mysticism he was studying, and this allowed him to distance himself from certain tendencies. He was working to validate his position, which, accredited by a religious anchoring, allowed him to play the game of cultural relations on an international level, as a theologian. Thus he attended meetings organized by C. G. Jung in Ascona, Switzerland. He was his own minister of Jewish affairs. One can understand, then, that he wrote the following to Benjamin: "I assume that you will dedicate the first volume of your collected critical reflections to the memory of [Friedrich Gundolf" (a Jewish Germanist, a disciple of Stefan George, who had just died). [32] A former sycophant of George's movement, he had been excluded from the circle—and thus perhaps even restored to his origins. He was in any case close to Scholem's ideas, and he was not a Marxist.

Facing a flat rejection, in an intense exchange of letters in 1934, Benjamin negotiated. He designated the stanzas in Scholem's poem to which he could subscribe. At bottom, he gave in, but with the aim of constructing his own response on that basis. Within the framework adopted, he sought a vision compatible with Marxism. This world would be founded on a form of secular belief that one ought not to be able to reject, and in which he could include Kafka. Thus the vision remained largely theological. Benjamin's position was dual: he situated himself within his own domain, when he took his distance from the traditional or "official" forms of theology, where Brod could be found, before Scholem, and before Robert Weltsche, the editor of the German-language Zionist magazine that was still published in Nazi Germany. But he was just as careful to distance himself from an aesthetic or artistic reading; such a reading would have had less import for the Marxists. He had to use force (and artifice) to preserve the framework of what he was fighting; he noted that his essay had "its own broad—although admittedly shrouded—theological side." [33] He gave up the traditional religious framework, which was always both present and absent, but he acknowledged that the author he was discussing was not free either to invent or to compromise. His lot was to reproduce a deformed state of human consciousness, which was expressed in a world "of images." [34] Thus the literal poetic character of Kafka's narratives is shattered. The stories are marked by the pursuit of and search for an absent deity to which they flee and never articulate—hence the reduction to hope or anguish. Uwe Steiner thinks that Brod's "grace" had been transferred to that absence of salvation. Expiation has no function other than a return to guilt, which is only manifested in flight into forgetting. [35] We witness, moreover, a veritable suppression of the creative agency, of the subject behind the creation. Benjamin anchors this claim in a para-aesthetic postulate, more philosophical or cultural than religious: these religious texts (as is acknowledged), but without religion; they demand, in this case, through their form and their extreme primitivism, to be attributed to an original state of society.

On this basis, an agreement was reached between Jerusalem and Paris, despite positions that were, in fact, irreconcilable. After all, they were Jews, both of them—or all three of them: the author of the Essay, the interlocutor, historian of the Jewish religion and guardian of the tradition, and the object of their interrogation, who had expressed himself with great lucidity while living under Hitler, Year Two. Where could they publish, and how? Scholem, the intransigent friend, had Zionism in mind, which were necessary, under the current regime, in the Jewish milieu. Benjamin yielded. He adapted a second time; the negotiations were more concrete. The Essay would appear, but only in excerpts, [36] in the journal published by Robert Weltsch, who was from Prague, as was Kafka's friend Felix Weltsch. [37] But publication was also controlled by agents of the Nazi party, which imposed its orders. The *Jüdische Rundschau* was still tolerated, as long as this organ addressed a Jewish

public exclusively, and not Germany. Thus Benjamin “Judaized” his text by adding some ten allusions—not too many!—without renouncing universalization. References and developments were dispersed throughout the texture of the Essay readers of the journal and the Nazi censors. The paradox of convergence is only apparent. One was under orders to be Jewish, in order to be excluded.

Benjamin adapted his language to this contemporary reality, ten years after Kafka’s death. He was also humoring Max E. at the time. Scholem defended Brod from his own standpoint, approving, against his detractors, the publication of Kafka’s posthumous works. They must not be destroyed; they indeed belong to “literature,” but must be treated as religious documentation. Benjamin can thus defend them, as the motivation is sacred. Brod expressed himself in similar terms. By insisting on Kafka’s “demoniacal” nature in his biography, Brod could be said to have distinguished himself from Kafka’s friends during the writer’s lifetime. [38] His perception of his classmate was singular, in Prague; his devotion was by no means common. Long before the edition of the posthumous works, which represented by far the bulk of Kafka’s production, there had indeed been a question, on the part of the friend, of “recognition” in the most rigorous sense. The perception and adherence were not simply positive; they were absolute. Others viewed this difference as alienation.

That moment, in Prague, took on historical value; its exceptional character was thought to be linked to a religious affiliation. Yet this affiliation is hard to defend. Was it in harmony with the great fresco of matriarchal promiscuity that Benjamin was constructing? It was going to form the background for the Essay and make it possible to transfer the current social expectation onto the ancient history of the human race. Only disparate elements were being considered in Kafka; they were integrated by Benjamin into a whole. These elements remained disconcerting for later interpreters, and even for recent ones. The two orientations, religion and history, are not always mutually exclusive. The examples are chosen from among human given the considerable influence that has been exerted by the Essay. Everything is mixed together, through the necessity of the “schema” that is adopted each time, whatever it may be. Every stop is articulated, either on the object of a revelation or else on language and the virtues of Benjamin’s discourse, but always under an arbitrary constraint.

## Kafka’s absence from the history of criticism

Hannah Arendt summarizes or virtually anticipates the critical treatment of the relation between Kafka and Benjamin by all differences. The theme of failure is central for her, too; she establishes an identity between them. In her reflections on Benjamin, she writes that he had not needed to read Kafka in order to think the way Kafka did. The last sentence of his “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” could have been formulated by Kafka. [39] She devotes her attention to lucidity and experience, focusing much less on art. [40]

Numerous studies have been devoted to that essay. Sigrid Weigel, in her contribution to the *Benjamin-Handbuch*, includes a list. [41] The viewpoints and interests diverge, but no study has concentrated on the reading and its deficiencies. It is as though the question did not arise, as though the author’s work indeed corresponded to what the critics discuss. The almost exclusive focus has thus remained on Benjamin and his relation to the work, and the critics have by and large remained within Benjamin’s world, with the evolution that it had undergone. This viewpoint is illustrated perfectly in a well-documented study by Hans Mayer, who establishes the chronology with supreme confidence and knows how to clear up the story of what he calls the intellectual “constellations” in which Benjamin gradually found himself. [42] This is to leave the text behind, to the benefit of a viewpoint borrowed from a history of ideas, a *Geistesgeschichte*—a history that is ideally represented by the interests and readings of a universal author. What Benjamin had projected in the form of a system could also be undone in such a way as to isolate particular aspects, such as the “tradition,” [43] or the “image,” [44] or the Benjaminian “aura.” [45] The author Benjamin represents literary theory as such; he embodies it, and this is the source of his success. There is thus no obstacle to establishing various connections with the new problematics. Derridean deconstruction might find a distant prefiguration there. [46] Benjamin was an essence, a whole, a particular and astonishing object. Wolfgang Matz, in his review of Jean-Michel Palmier’s unfinished biography of Benjamin, [47] situates the book by stating that it “follows the history of life and the work in chronological order.” [48] This is essential: “By this decision alone, Palmier avoids seeing Benjamin from the perspective of his theoretical interest. The staggering parallelism of the metaphysician and the critic, of the autobiography and the political writings, leads to doing justice to all these aspects in a historical rather than a systematic presentation” [49] (this leaves the floor to Scholem, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Brecht, Ernst Bloch, or Hannah Arendt). For my part, I have been led to include this approach, in order to highlight the distances and the divergences.

Bruno Tackels’ recent monograph on Benjamin [50] cannot deal with the matter in the end, because the author construes Kafka’s “frightening logic” as a positive doctrine. Benjamin is congratulated for having been able to identify this logic and place it at the center of his reading: the son is accused “of the simple fact of having ... been a witness to the world of the fathers, which was collapsing” (according to Tackels’ reading of “The Judgment”). Tackels follows the speculative construction of the Essay and makes no effort to figure out how to read and decipher Kafka. The content of the work will be that of Benjamin’s interpretation, according to the “reading matrix” developed with regard to Oklahoma in *Amerika*. The distinctive feature of the theatre, which one discovers here, is that actions can be dissolved in a world of gestures. [51]

## The matriarchy

The Essay, as in a musical composition, distributes the movements of a dominant motif with a play of repetitions that confers a unifying agency. Thematically, the prehistoric world holds everything together; it becomes better known, however, or better identified, toward the end, where the accent falls more strongly on human sexuality, which Benjamin associated above all with scenes from novels. He resituates these in a non-hierarchical social organization, legitimized by the association with Johann Jakob Bachofen, and the resonances, more political than religious, that reference to Bachofen elicited at the time. The Essay's work on matriarchy, extensive excerpts of which had been published with an introduction by Alfred Bäumler in 1926, had had considerable success in diverse if not conflicting milieus. For a Marxist, Bachofen offered the model of a classless society. In 1926, Benjamin received Carl Albrecht Bernoulli's massive tome on Bachofen; [52] he told Scholem that the book had read to him as in a fairy tale (*märchenhafter Weise*). He convinced himself that "a confrontation with Bachofen and Klages [was] perhaps unavoidable," even though at bottom he had to recognize that "this can be strictly conducted only from the perspective of Jewish theology"—which the advocates of promiscuity in Munich must have feared, or rather abhorred. They did not suspect that redemption could have such a past, in disorder and denial. The subject was in the air. In April 1934, Adorno, for his part, was preparing a study on Bachofen and Klages. The two names were associated, and the study was intended to broaden the horizon of mythic thought, which Adorno had circumscribed in his recent book on Kierkegaard. At the end, Adorno did not complete the new project. [54]

A year later, Benjamin had the occasion to renew his interest in Bachofen's work in the context of a presentation of the historian's work, which was intended for the *Nouvelle Revue Française* but ultimately remained unpublished. [55] He wrote Scholem from Denmark on July 20, 1934: "I believe I wrote you that I began working on an essay on Bachofen ... This is the first time that for the first time I shall get to read him myself; up to now I have always relied on Bernoulli and Klages." [56] Scholem reacted vigorously to the way Bachofen was used in the Essay. [57] His insistence is striking. He invokes anthropology against theology. In *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, Scholem deduced the young Benjamin's interest in myth: "Benjamin must have been more familiar around this time [1916] with the writings of Johann Jakob Bachofen and also must have read the works of the ethnologist Karl Theodor Preuss" [58]; Benjamin was trying "to formulate the laws governing the world of pre-mythical spectral phenomena." He distinguished between two historical ages of the spectral and the demonic that preceded the age of revelation, or messianism. [59] Here we have an "origin" of Benjamin's speculation. In his work, the phase of a pre-mythical world, in the process of formation, can be related to the category of ambiguity, imposed by fate and illustrated in the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, and in "Fate and Character." [60]

The themes alternate and overlap. One might suppose that with "the Oklahoma theater," an excerpt from the novel *Am Kongo*, *The Missing Person*, and with his focus on theatricality as such and especially on gestures, to which he attributes a central function in his evocation of this past, Benjamin would come closer and closer to a study of Kafka's highly idiosyncratic world. This is not at all the case: these elements are again interpreted as ritual expressions, making it possible to go back to the "prehistoric world" or "before-world" (*Vorwelt*); they are related to that constraining and, as it were, archaeologically "neutral" background. The reading pulls away from the writer's models; it rises up from the depths, rediscovered and excavated in the basement of Kafka's imaginary. The procedure could be described as appropriation. Kafka was unable to prevent re-reading from speaking about things he was not speaking about.

Adorno opposed the use Benjamin made of this theory, first in his critique of the Essay, [61] then in his discussion, written in the United States, of Benjamin's presentation of *Passages* at the Institute for Social Research in New York (which had moved from Frankfurt), and then elsewhere; [62] Adorno denounced a "mythologizing and archaizing tendency" in Benjamin's critique, recalling the reactionary political positions of thinkers like Ludwig Klages in Munich or Carl Gustav Jung in Zurich. [63] A methodical reflection on this subject has not seen the light of day; at least, Benjamin did not write or develop one. Later, in 1937, when he was writing his study of Baudelaire's poetry, he seems to have made Adorno's objections his own. [64]

## Divine virtuality

What makes Kafka speak, for Benjamin, is what he himself, Benjamin, speaks about. The reflective and analytic power of his original projections ought to have radically proscribed the procedure in his case. Every experimental dimension remains intimately tied to an act of invention. At the point where the narrative is the darkest and most tortured, the reader will still be looking for a way out. The stage is set; it bursts forth and *causes itself to be seen*, to be contemplated, as it were, in its necessary arbitrariness. The constraints are unexpected, unbelievable; they are always of a self-evident necessity because the reader remains within the singularity that is being constructed. It is not that Kafka's universe is not profoundly literary. Benjamin freely and deliberately integrates all the literary or cultural associations possible, whether his public is familiar with them, ignorant of them, or in the process of learning them (the list of evocations is impressive). He not only totalizes the material that he can usefully gather, in relation to his own project, but he also universalizes the object of his study, with all his bits and pieces as an essayist, through a multitude of associations and allusions, which are, in fact, charged with bringing outside

confirmation to the interpretations imposed on the text. The Essay is not limited to one particular perspective. Benjamin an aphorism-sentence that is intended to situate “Kafka’s work”: “the magnetic field between Thora and Tao.” It is univocal (*west-östlich*); the synthesis belongs to the horizon of expectations of the reader, toward whom the critic is opening up once familiar and disorienting path.

In a 1921 article, Max Brod reported on a conversation he had had with Kafka on the decline of the contemporary world: “‘We are nihilistic thoughts,’ Kafka said, ‘suicidal thoughts, that come into God’s head.’” This was a theme. Brod, the interlocutor, evoked the maleficent demiurge of gnosis. “No,” said Kafka, “I believe we are not such a radical relapse of only one of his bad moods. He had a bad day.” Brod responded “Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know.” Kafka replied, smiling: “Oh, plenty of hope—for God—no end of hope—only not for us.” He must have been thinking of the virtualities of the *plérōma*, the void, as if it were close at hand. Kafka’s friend Brod viewed this brief dialogue as an exceptional and characteristic piece (he cites it again as such in his *Biography*). [66]

Kafka in no way evokes the ambiguous creatures of the Essay. Benjamin did not invoke the hope that would be denied by God’s pure surroundings, endowed with virtualities entirely different from our own (Brod was specific: outside of the stage “this world, whose form we know”). He recognized in that “other world” a stage in the evolution of this one; but if it is different from ours, it is because the other world is that of the “assistants,” who have left the family and the father’s authority and the repository of hope. The connection is not apposite. [67] Benjamin found in it an allusion to the primitive promiscuity that obsessed him. Still, one cannot see that prehistoric world according to Kafka as a divine presence in our own world. Benjamin does not do so, even if he does misinterpret the reference in the brief exchange recalled here. He transfers the speculative confrontation between God and the world to a hypothetical substratum (in the literal sense) in history.

In the chapter of her book on Benjamin titled “L’oubli et le souvenir” (Forgetting and Remembering), [68] Patricia Lavelle follows a thread that she sees as a key element in the entire construction of the Essay: memory succeeds in establishing a tension between the present and an allegorical break in the past. She then situates Benjamin’s reading of Kafka within that opposition. The oblivion in which certain creatures live in Kafka’s tales and novels, as read by Benjamin, is based on a stage of experience proper to the contemporary period, which itself calls for the analysis of a veritable alienation; moreover, this step cannot be understood correctly unless one sees it as including the survival of a primitive state that arose in the course of human history prior to the era of rational judgment. In Lavelle’s interpretation, that state was perpetuated in another form subservient to the established powers, and it encompassed the moments of a messianic revolt. Benjamin could have read Kafka in the light of this evolution. The stratifications belong to a projection proper to Benjamin, adapted to his Marxist positions. He first anchors them in a look toward the past, treated as the locus of a primitive state of nature. The counterpoint of salvation is reserved for the future, deferred to the end of time, and concomitant with a withdrawal. This was a found that could be seen as a consolidation of the strangeness of Kafka’s singular work and an objectivization of his instructive. Benjamin also turns away from this construct, reaffirming a dialectical structure that Adorno deemed inadequate.

There is no need to leave the world and its evolution behind. Benjamin situated this evolution in the context of a dialectical “scientific” anthropological quest that was to substitute for a philosophy of history. Lavelle, returning to the dialogue with Brod, which Benjamin cites in the essay, limits herself to theological speculation, which one finds in Kafka but not in Benjamin. She juxtaposes other texts—for example, “Imagination,” a fragment written around 1920–1921, [69] *Berlin Childhood*, [70] “On the Mimetic Faculty” [71] —from which she retains a gnostic perspective, and she interprets the prehistoric world as an extra-worldly stage. She associates “female supremacy” with a state that avoids the “self-negation” of God in the world fall, [72] “the feminine element of the spirit.” This association is problematic. The primitive matriarchy of humans cannot be conflated with the reign of “Sophia,” which is described by Hans Jonas, a historian of the Gnostic doctrines, as a stage extrapolated by antithesis to the demiurgic act reserved for the masculine element at the heart of a divine cleavage. [73] These are separate matters: if the one, the theological theme, is evoked in Kafka’s brief dialogue, the other, which predominates in the Essay, is anthropological in nature, however great the speculative component may be. At the end of the dialogue with Benjamin retains the note of hope: “These words provide a bridge to those extremely strange figures in Kafka ... for which there may be hope,” outside the family.

Hope, for Benjamin, had been transmitted thanks to these ambiguous, nebulous creatures that stand out against a dark background; he identifies them with their contemporary descendants, acolytes, or assistants, who play significant roles in Kafka’s novels. [74] For them, hope exists. Beyond the dialectic as it is sketched in the exchange between Kafka and Benjamin with these beings Benjamin reintroduces a utopia—no doubt more Marxist in character—that recalls the indeterminate and salutary production of an immemorial past. The contemporary messengers, survivors or others nostalgic for lost worlds find in themselves the contradiction of another time, a more indecisive age that they take on. The author explains: “To speak of order or hierarchy is impossible here. Even the world of myth of which we think in this context is incomparably younger than Kafka’s world [that of the intra-worldly “prehistoric world”], which has been promised redemption by the myth.” [75] The transition toward the later world of rational organizations prefigures the disappearance of these hybrid beings, these oppositional existences. The archaic world of strange creatures, privileged or ungraspable, can be restored. Thus Kafka

have carried nostalgia for the bygone creatures in his heart of hearts. He is not presumed to have sought to describe how doing remained inherent in being. The duality, however regenerative it may have been, was transferred onto the objective speculative intuition. The reference to the enigmatic creatures bears upon an anterior, primary, historical, and pre-historical non-distinction.

There are two approaches—as if the creatures aspired to transmission and it were denied them: “What may be discerned more tenderly subdued, in the activities of these messengers is the law that reigns, in an oppressive and gloomy way, over the whole group of beings. None has a firm place in the world, or firm, inalienable outlines. There is not one that is not either or falling,” [76] and so on. This flight of lyricism is worthy of an epic; it inspires Benjamin’s narrative and demonstrative inventions.

In the collection of notes and aphorisms titled “He” (“Er”), Kafka says that he wondered one day what wish he could form on the subject of his own life. [77] He was implicitly referring—a singular occurrence—to his existence as a writer. Benjamin makes such a reference in the Essay as well. [78] The description (often studied) is fundamental and, in a sense, unsurpassable. It was a matter of formulating a vow that could be maintained all one’s life, in life’s ups and downs (*Falle Steigen*). During one’s own lifetime, one had to be in a position to recognize one’s existence as a void, a dream, a suspense. Kafka explains: it is not as if one were declaring that the fabrication of an object were nothing, or that, once abolished, the object would be a void. No, the two orders coexist, and govern one another. Benjamin rediscovers the archaic gestures as he sees it, illustrate the inability of the student-scribes to listen to a dictation and follow its rhythm. They have to appear the master before they write, for every sentence. This is not exactly the case, or, if it is, it is only in a derivative manner. There have been better readers of Kafka. [79]

Kafka’s “Testament” demanded that his writings be destroyed; this was interpreted by Benjamin as evidence of inadequacy. [80] In this light, the essential feature of Kafka’s epic story would consist in constant deferral, as in *The Thousand and C Nights*, based on an incomprehensibility that makes the text nebulous. This is the explanation (“the gesture that he did not understand”) of the retreat that Benjamin found again in the terms of Kafka’s will, demanding the destruction of his writings. Benjamin saw this gesture as an expression of the writer’s dissatisfaction: Kafka had not succeeded and had to recognize that he himself belonged to the human category he had described, condemned to failure. This is perhaps the key statement of the entire essay: “He did fail in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into teachings, to turn it into a parable and restore the stability and unpretentiousness which, in the face of reason, seemed to him the only appropriate thing for it.” [81] If he were right—if he meant failure to be paramount, and the interpretation to remain open—he would have had to have had a theoretical ambition. This was to attribute to Kafka an ambition that he did not have. Perhaps Kafka went further by including negativity, introducing it systematically in his writings as a counterpoint that is necessarily associated with existence.

In 1928, in a newspaper article countering an attack, Benjamin defended Brod’s decision to publish Kafka’s works, invoking the friendship between the two poets. He began with the idea that the interdiction could be explained by the unfinished nature of the works, without the intention of keeping the content secret. Kafka must have said to himself: “I have had once again to relegate what is done to the benefit of what has not been done,” but he must have known as well that his friend would not do the work and take responsibility for the decision in his stead. [82] The secret was theological and buried in the work, “while the outside looks unostentatious, simple and sober.” He was already pointing to the core—his own “interpretation.”

## The double separation of Ulysses and the sirens

If, in Kafka’s “Silence of the Sirens,” [83] the sirens do not sing, it is because they are showing Ulysses that they have understood his resolution and the stratagem he has invented so as to hear them. They evade him by choosing a different direction; his countering move is neither unknown nor forbidden to them. Ulysses has attuned himself to the music he can hear, in the intimacy of his distant vantage point. Thus he is unable to perceive the absence of the singers; he is as if imprisoned by his own power. The means he has adopted for listening, while they are not singing, seduce the women in their turn. The weapon of their silence glides over him. As Ulysses is persuaded of the effectiveness of his precautions, however false they may be, he believes he is hearing the Sirens sing. His conviction wins the day, it prepares the reversal: the seduction against which he is protecting himself disappears. The sirens no longer seduce; they are fascinated in their turn by the effect of their seduction, their reflection in Ulysses’ eyes. Even as he protects himself from them, to the extent of making them disappear, he makes them live. It is at this point that their meeting takes place, at the core of a tension, in an antithesis. The sirens do not sing; as for him, he *believes* he hears them. The conclusion is poignant: “If the Sirens had possessed consciousness they would have been annihilated at that moment. But they remained as they had been; all that had happened was that Ulysses had escaped them.” [84] Absence triumphs twice, once on each side.

Kafka exhausts the analysis of the possible interpretations of his story. A codicil is attached to the draft, mentioning that according to another interpretation, a more subtle or more radical one, the crafty Ulysses might not have locked himself into this illusory stratagem. He knew perfectly well that the sirens were not singing, but he set about uselessly, in the void, producing a fiction. He equipped himself with a defense that under normal circumstances would have been effective. The

story is then paralleled by a second interpretation, resting on the first, at a higher degree of consciousness. Absence is even more present. [85] The real and the unreal are face to face.

In the logic of his own construction, Benjamin interprets the story as a triumph over the powers of the myth. For him, the Sirens defend themselves with their silence, but Ulysses was able, marvelously, to escape his destiny by playing the game of fiction, the supreme ruse. [86] This is because the philosopher remains faithful to his own speculative schema, applied to the evolution in the history of humankind. He classifies and pigeonholes. Ulysses plays the role of an agent of history; he rewrites the myth, which is embodied as such, as a state of the consciousness of humanity, represented by those exemplary sirens and the seductresses. Through the angle of music, Benjamin manages to slice history in two. The Sirens are the myth, which Ulysses transcends; but music goes back further, bringing support inherited from a mediating world represented by the assistants—so Kafka-like. [87] He has no concern either for the construction of the narrative or for its logic. However, more than elsewhere, he is attentive to Kafka's words, his well-wrought expressions. The triumph over the Sirens finds an object to correlate in history in the symbolic surpassing that Benjamin extrapolates from the story. For him, it represents the advent of another age, characterized by the form of the *taïe*. Ulysses' strategy was able to break down the violence of the mythic powers. Now freedom of invention was available to the intellect in the story told by Homer, before Kafka. Homer does not reproduce a "myth," and the episode of the Sirens does not contribute any change; he is composing a story. The myth shines in the distance, as it were, under the rewritten story. If one were to follow Benjamin, one would conclude that Kafka, before him, as a historian, transformed the world of the *Odyssey* and made the hero of the epic a transitory and intermediate figure, representative of a new age of humanity—the third age, post-mythical. This is an extrapolation. In place of a real interpretation, a desire proper to the genre of the essay asserts itself, a desire for a historical projection.

## The reception of the Essay (1934)

The framework of the elements saved from early oblivion allowed Benjamin, and readers sensitive to his virtuosity, to understand the strangeness of Kafka's plots and their unsettling outcomes. If Kafka's entire work is taken as a unified whole and if one sees it as the expression of a universal experience situated in a particular stage of history, it offers the advantage of being applicable, like Freud's work, to the destiny of the human soul. Kafka is transformed: he becomes the hero of the forgetting of a memory, and of a memory of forgetting, a witness to what survives. The power of a recollection is embodied in him, unknown to him. He examines his knowledge and, like an oracle, he reveals the way things were in the most remote past just as Freud does—a past that still controls us, as it does in *Totem and Taboo*. The analogies are striking, and they proliferate from similar expectations. The most fantastic and least comparable world, the vast realm of unpredictable inventions, these are taken together as a path apt to bring to light humanity's primitive or archaic past, a past treated as an experience of origination. Kafka made it possible to gain access to this world; he somehow brought it back to life from the depths of the unconscious. The horizon of psychoanalysis remains just as present as it does in Benjamin's analysis of Proust. [88] The discovery by involuntary memory relegated Proust to a place in the Marxist framework of a collective project; this life is limited to the psychic adventures of the individual, which remained happenstance. Benjamin's Kafka, equipped with a critical function, through primitive experience and ulterior recollection, lent himself better to social expansion.

Witnessing supplied the principal angle through which Benjamin linked Kafka with burning contemporary political realities on every side. He had been living in exile in Paris for more than a year. "Ten Years after Death": the title of the Essay can also be read this way, in the second degree, as an adaptation to circumstances. Benjamin's reading of Kafka was thus legitimate even for a Marxist; it was no longer naïve. The outline of the Essay was drawn up from this perspective. The reconstruction was that of a state of consciousness attributed to Kafka and presumed present in the highly diverse content of his novel stories. The distancing that would be demanded by the reading of his fictional works, which were literary and eminently precise—indeed, they were brought to life by their unequalled precision—and the discovery of a meaning that was achieved by the study of their composition, could not then be taken into consideration. The revelation achieved by strangeness, so specific, is, paradoxically, more universal: it even achieves freer expression as a result of the strangeness. Yet it never appears in this light in the preparatory reading for the Essay, for it was predetermined by expectations. Most of Kafka's readings (which can be found in his complete works) [89] are situated in another order, which is already that of the transference to which the distancing of another speculative and autonomous projection, *sui generis*, is legitimized.

It is thus Benjamin whom we read in the logic that belongs to his own competence. We observe the way the essayist proceeds via detours in the use of the "pre-text," balancing the developments of his demonstrative project and the multitude of references to Kafka's work and associations with other skillfully intertwined authors. The Essay does not deal with Kafka; interpretation is embodied in it; Benjamin takes hold of the author, *in absentia redivivus*. The choice is hard to uphold, a choice that had to be defended against other views, against Adorno's reading, for example, which was more distant in one sense, closer to Brecht's, closer in another sense. [90]

## Contemporary reactions

## 1. Adorno

We find a significant reaction to the appearance of the various unpublished writings in a comment by Siegfried Kracauer must write about the volume of writings, which is naturally very important, even though it is sometimes unintelligible and unfortunately of a monotony that is in the long run tiresome. This has to do no doubt with the lack of sensuality.” [91] The volume is important, it must be discussed, but readers were neither ready for it nor prepared to read and enter that world. Adorno’s “Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka” (“Notes on Kafka”) appeared more than twenty years later, in 1953. [92] In a more part of his observations, Kracauer noted, rightly, it seems, that the references to political and social conditions do not seem to define Kafka’s relation to the realities of his epoch. This relation was, in fact, vast and omnipresent, almost unfathomable given the degree to which the elements were interwoven, transferred, and yet refashioned and rethought.

In the letter Benjamin was expecting, which he received in December 1934, [93] Adorno, who had access to the full text of the Essay, [94] begins by congratulating the author. After some dithyrambic praise, he proceeds in a second phase to question systematically all the positions Benjamin has defended. He lectures the author on the dialectical method he should have followed. He challenges the dominant thesis in particular, the idea that a prehistoric world survived in Kafka’s work. One way to say that he gets his praise out of the way in order to be freer and more equitable in a critical section; it seems fairer still to accept the duality fully, as such. Adorno certainly recognizes Benjamin’s art, power, and virtuosity, reinforced by the composition and the theoretical project of the Essay, but he considers that the argumentation often fails to stay on track and essentially challenges its basis, what he calls the inversion of theology, its ciphered nature. Benjamin in effect distances himself from both natural and supernatural interpretations. He, Adorno, would say that Benjamin is a great essayist, but the dialectical foundation on which he himself relies is not sturdy enough in his friend’s case. Is this foundation compatible with messianism?

The strange figure of Odradek in “The Care of a Family Man” [95] offers a good illustration of the divergence. Benjamin interprets Odradek a creature from the prehistoric world, crushed by a feeling of guilt and seeking to avoid judgment in a desperate flight. The extravagant mechanism of its structure—“the most singular bastard which the prehistoric world has begotten with guilt”—would reproduce “the form which things assume in oblivion.” [96] It is as though he were holding a coat of arms emblem of that world of oblivion that he is trying to reconstitute. Setting out to describe the object as if it were not a product of Kafka’s invention, Benjamin takes hold of the figure and readapts it, deformed (*entstellt*) as an image of the family man’s “care,” and also as the folkloric “Little Hunchback” who would be “housed” in that world. [97] Odradek represents the last era of history that Kafka brings back to life. The “intermediary” world that came out of the prehistoric world cannot be fully explored. Everything is blended together there. Benjamin refers broadly to Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption* and its ancestor cult, but that work is set in China. The deaths of primitive people lead him into the subterranean world of animals. But not with total forgetfulness: a reference to Ludwig Tieck allows him to bring along “a strange guilt.” Reflection is inscribed in animals. Well-known stories lead him to Odradek.

In “The Little Hunchback,” folklore has invested a song with the same symbolic meaning: the hunchback inhabits “distorted life” and awaits deliverance by the Messiah, anticipating a full restoration on all fronts. Here Kafka has been left behind: he reaches depths, Kafka touches ground which neither ‘mythical divination’ nor ‘existential theology’ [that of Benjamin’s day] support him with. It is the ground of folk tradition, German as well as Jewish.” [98] There is truly nothing individual. Everything is mobilized against this. Kafka’s attention was able to embrace every creature. Is this nature or the supernatural? For Adorno here again, dialectics claims its due: closer to the story that Kafka invents and writes, Adorno views “care” as the danger weighing on the household. Heidegger is overturned: a “cipher, a “figure” of hope has appeared, implying the suppression of the domestic economy, a transcendence that sustains organic nature in an opposition that turns upon the presence of (care). [99] The exegesis is more dialectical: it is guided by reflection and it relies on a different narrative rigor; it retains its strength even if Kafka’s story fails to correspond to it.

In the chapter he devotes to Benjamin, [100] Pierre Bouretz deals with the Essay in passages in which the discussion of divergences between Benjamin and Scholem provides the essential framework. Bouretz does not fail to notice that Benjamin’s interpretation of the Odradek figure is very reductive. Indeed, the absence of a common reading of the stories by the two friends, Benjamin and Scholem, is striking. They do not engage in discussion, but talk past each other; they oppose one another. They *could* not recognize, at that time, that narrative distance was all the more methodical in that it remained in the thing described and in the writing. The projection of a dualist schema—original sin, then oblivion—with its obscure deformations (according to Bouretz’s summary) did not allow Benjamin to arrive at a reading. [101] The procedure that Benjamin thought he could apply to Kafka’s work can be compared to the mimetic faculty that he detected later on in Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil*, when he found support in a collective remembering that offered the poet a way to conceive historical temporality.

It is clear that Adorno’s critique does not aim to grasp the meaning of the work, either; it corrects an exegesis. Adorno is caught himself between Kafka and Benjamin; he, too, fails to “read” Kafka. Rather than seeing the strangeness of the singular

as the symbol of an objective state of society, he explores the virtues of his interpretive method, making this strangeness a negative symbol of the society that is reflected in the domestic and familial economy. For my part, limiting myself to the text and the writing, I would link the “care” inscribed in the title of the story with the creature’s bizarre body, concretized in its phantasmatic appearance. The absence of any meaning is most perfectly described there. The creature is neither a fringe threat, but an intermittent presence that remains ungraspable. The tendency of the artifice to position itself stably, which is granted in spite of everything, makes it a projection. Its very fabrication becomes an animated process that is able to sit itself sparingly in the form of a specter, an occasional and undying vis-à-vis. The text unfolds; it explains itself from within according to its own logic.

## 2. Kraft

Werner Kraft, [102] more rational than Benjamin, and recognized by the latter as someone who knew Kafka well, [103] found that the Essay, spoiled by its mysticism, fell into esotericism and lacked clarity. He distinguished Kafka from the working method of the Essay, which precluded all intervention in depth. According to Kraft, Benjamin limited himself to a level of meaning that was superficial or, as it were, phenomenological, reserving interpretation for himself. [104] The observation was entirely pertinent, even though the discovery of meaning required the acceptance of the literary form, from which the reflection must be separated. Benjamin responded that one could legitimately find the form problematic: “I wanted to have a free hand but not want to finish.” [105] The moment had not come. Benjamin’s motives were no doubt contestable, but they are instructive. “every interpretation that ... proceeds from the assumption of a body of mystical writing realized by [Kafka], instead of proceeding from the author’s own feeling, his rectitude, and the reasons for the inevitable failure, would miss the historical nexus of the entire work.” [106] Benjamin justifies himself by evoking another, more legitimate mystical exegesis, which does not supply but which would have to be conceived in the same framework; he did not do this because he remained too close to Kafka. He responds to Brecht’s objection, which Kraft shared, that the Essay employed a phenomenological approach, suggesting that this was not the project expected, based on historical materialism. The description is rather convoluted and the reading to which Benjamin says he adhered too closely is imaginary; furthermore, he refers to an interpretation that has been carried out and that would disturb minds like Scholem’s even more than his own interpretation.

## 3. Brecht

Benjamin noted the content of his conversations with Brecht about Kafka on three occasions during the summer of 1933: July 5, August 6, and August 31. He had Brecht read the text and waited for a critique. The second conversation brings the divergences clearly. For Brecht, the Essay read like a personal, non-objective journal—the aesthetic or literary requirement was as determined for him as the state of society. As for Kafka, he was a Jewish boy (*ein Judenjunge*) in a complacent, unconscious, or corrupt milieu in Prague. But from another standpoint, Kafka was a great writer. The form of the parable “serviceable” (*brauchbar*; Brecht returns to this central term: what traditions to integrate?), apart from any construction of a “danger of a Jewish fascism” exists—is he thinking of the Zionists or the believers among Kafka’s “advisors”? On this point, Kafka’s genius is undeniable: he is no longer the Jew, his stories perpetuate the best Chinese (and Brechtian) tradition; he sees Lao-Tse address him as a disciple. In addition (thinking of *The Trial*), Brecht recognized that Kafka grasped the alienation of the inhabitants of large cities, connecting history and a critical “modernity” (despite his milieu in Prague). On this point, Benjamin followed him, making use of that “real” antithesis in the face of the mythical matriarchy. Brecht operated in a radical fashion, against Scholem and against Benjamin.

Brecht had a hard time accepting Kafka. Benjamin knew this; in 1931, he wrote: “I have been surprised, during some conversations over these last weeks [when he went back to the Kafka dossier] at Brecht’s extremely positive attitude to Kafka’s work.” [107] One must not lose sight of the fact that he is addressing Scholem; the latter had just explained his position to him. Benjamin recalled the existence of a powerful antagonist who had something to say. Brecht was not uninvolved with the work, whereas he did not read Proust, nor did he read Valéry. He did not reject Kafka, admiring his calm, the precision of his descriptive distance, and his “images.” Yet he saw the writer as a dreamer. His esoteric thinking (deemed incomprehensible) bypassed the economic reality by which, for a Marxist such as himself, consciousness was driven.

In his conversations with Benjamin, Brecht recognized Kafka as the author of parables (a form he saw as homologous to Chinese wisdom) and as a visionary—two focal points that Benjamin would make his own in the long letter he wrote to Scholem on June 12, 1938. Mystical experience and modernity are two foci of an ellipsis, he wrote, distant from one another. The first is above all representative of tradition, the other of the anonymous figure, the contemporary city-dweller. [108] The two poles of the antithesis are not entirely distinct, however. Brecht, even as he accepted the antique form of the parable, reproached Kafka the writer, whom he admired, for not having been able to make the form transparent; this is to say that he did not see its autonomous, contrasted, contradictory, or paradoxical orientation. Kafka was a visionary; Brecht’s interpretation, inspired by the fear of an ant-hill society, clings to this point: he feels the alienation produced by communal life and concern for its organization, but that obsession would have alienated Kafka himself and prevented him from analyzing the reality around him. In short, it would have kept him from seeing the world as it is. In Brecht’s eyes, the “precision” of

stories could be nothing but the privilege of an imprecise mind, the wandering of a dreamer. The unbelievable exactitude dialectically ungrounded, a product of the imaginary. That in no way prevented Brecht from making a strong case for Kafka's inventiveness and his style.

"The Next Village," [109] a short text and yet a micro-totality, has been linked by Stéphane Mosès to the interpretations by Benjamin and Brecht. Mosès limits himself, here as elsewhere, to one of Kafka's compositional devices, in this instance "embedding" (he distinguishes four speaking voices). Once again, the formal analysis called for (borrowed chiefly from Bakhtin) falls short [110]; it compromises the search for invention, which goes hand in hand with reflection upon—and analysis of—the idiomatic narrative logic. In the memory of an elderly man, life closes in. To give an idea of his experience goes to the other pole, to his youth, where life is concentrated in its fullness and is thus reduced to nothing. Kafka gives floor to no other speaker; only the grandfather speaks, and he does so from his own perspective, which makes him even that is slipping away. Deprived of the time he is living through, the young man risks falling short of his goals, even the one closest at hand. The insufficiency is pushed to an absolute degree in the extension to an opposite pole. The seemingly natural enterprise is doomed to failure. The experience of conscious loss is intensified by the inclusion of inexperience and unconsciousness; reflection takes hold, from a distance, of the most natural spontaneity.

Benjamin competes with Brecht in interpreting this story. Brecht relates it to the Eleatic paradox of the race between Achilles and the tortoise. In this view, the story illustrates the power of memory recapturing at lightning speed all the life that has lived. [111] If the race is divided up and we consider the infinitely small segments of which it is composed, the rider does not achieve his goal, but someone else will have succeeded. Brecht includes a human collectivity to come. The two situations contrasted in the story, linked to age, are thus neglected. The cause is no longer connected with reasoning, which extends all of life and includes youth in the grandfather's old age. According to Benjamin's reading, [112] life in the memory of the elderly is transformed into writing that they can only read backwards, in the present instant. Benjamin retains a deformity he sees in it an infirmity and a lack of wisdom. Old people succumb to time; they can only decipher the writing in reverse they "meet themselves" and can understand the book "in the flight from the present." They rely on a tradition, and their reading can, from this perspective, be related to the episode from the Essay in which the students do not sleep. [113] The letter is dead; it does not lead to meaning. Writing becomes a circuit on which things are upside down and where life is transformed. [114] In truth, one can see something else in the tension that structures this story. Life is condensed in memory to the point of rising up against itself and preventing its own most natural deployment. The explanatory principle leads to life to produce its own negation and to impose on life the complementary truth of a non-life.

Kafka's great rival, the other protagonist, Baudelaire, turns out to be in an analogous situation as far as the text is concerned. We have to wonder how far Benjamin, translator and exegete, went in his reading of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*). The poems attest to a contemporary state of society and the city, not to a remote origin of humankind; nevertheless, he, as in myth, the socially and historically speculative approach does not lead straight to the originality of the writing. Benjamin's interpretation consists essentially in relating the content to its allegorical expression.

## Later commentary: The final projects

With the only partial publication of 1934, however, Benjamin had not reached the end of his study. He would have liked to rewrite the Essay. He carefully collected the reactions of critics, which were communicated to him through letters. [115] Did he have thought about an aesthetics that could have included a place for the literary phenomenon? The question tormented him. Kafka's work was undeniably powerful, and yet so strange, so singularly original. Nevertheless, Benjamin does not go back to the author in his particularity; he does not define what the work, speculative in its own way, encompasses intellectually. The material Benjamin is dealing with, the philosophy of history, precludes such a definition. He proceeded in 1934, as though Kafka had retranslated Bachofen's ideas in his prose. The approach was aberrant; it had allowed him to project an even more aberrant model onto the object that led him off course.

The Essay had not satisfied everyone, not even its author. The problem it raised [116] continued to preoccupy Benjamin. It might supply the material for a book. The letter he later wrote to this end, the one addressed to Scholem on June 12, sketched out the lineaments of a project; it could be presented to Salman Schocken, the editor, who might find it persuasive. [118] We have to read this project, such as we have it, by situating it in its contemporary and existential, almost ailment perspective. It is divided into three parts: a ferocious diatribe against Brod, the author of the biography, is followed by a look at the historical and philosophical themes that structure the work, and it ends with a critical assessment of the position occupied by Kafka. This was to be Benjamin's last response to the question.

The polemic against Brod has several aspects. Benjamin sees the weaknesses and inadequacies of the man who was his friend and the editor of his works. Benjamin evokes and deems impossible a disposition (*Haltung*) on Brod's part toward the object. [119] The two terms—friendship, editing—were incompatible. Brod thought he was dealing with the figure of a "friend" of whom he was the apostle. This is not very far from a certain truth, however tendentious; the relationship of Brod and Benjamin was unique. Their perfect friendship is indeed the principal reason for the survival of the work, and even in part for its vitality.

existence. Benjamin did not understand what could have brought the two men together. Their relationship remained, for an enigma without a solution. Brod could not have had anything in common with the Kafka that Benjamin imagined. He saw Brod as a Jew ignorant of the kabbalistic initiations that Scholem had deciphered. These initiations were, in fact, of the sort of "opening." Was the invective directed at the conversation between Scholem and Schocken? Benjamin's polemic is as a settling of scores, a duly administered exercise in denigration. Scholem briefly approves, but with reservations; at the same time, he ups the ante, speaking of a "dirty trick." Benjamin "almost deserved the garland," for his skillful dealing with the death blow. [120] The terms used show, however, that Schocken was not fooled. Neither Scholem nor Benjamin ever spoke that way. They had, at another level, always taken Brod into account and recognized their debt. Then they were able, with a real change of heart, to think that he overstepped the role of heir and witness that had fallen to him. [121] It was now necessary to kill the enemy, the rival vis-à-vis Schocken, the editor. But the root of the opposition also had to do with the religious beliefs of Schocken himself, whatever Scholem may have said. [122] Moreover, if the June 1938 missive was ultimately aimed at Schocken, it was really necessary to warn the currently most influential Jewish publisher (as Weltsch, the Prague publisher, had had to be convinced in 1934) that the planned book would not have a religious or hagiographic orientation, neither in its Judaism nor in orthodox Zionism. Brod had no resemblance to the fictional character that Benjamin sought to introduce among Jews. This was written *ex negativo*.

Kafka, on this account, is disfigured. Benjamin, more Brechtian than ever, places him within the mystic tradition, which is ultimately crucial for Benjamin himself, and within the historical experience of modern alienation, provoked by the degradations of urban life and technology. The "crazy" and "grandiose" aspect is that the vision of this impossible present was communicated to him by the tradition itself (it is no longer a question of the "prehistoric world," set aside, perhaps owing to Adorno's critique). [123] The move to update is decisive. He cites a page in which Arthur Stanley Eddington, a physicist, exposes the consternation of scientists in the face of their discoveries; the text reads like Kafka. [124] He does not forget war and the exterminations, very near at hand. In a new dialectics, he makes Kafka a solitary individual, apart from the world who has no recourse but to turn toward the past, toward a shining, lost world, as a "complement" or a counterpart to the period in which he is living: "The experience that corresponds to that of Kafka as a private individual will probably first be accessible to the masses at such time as they are about to be annihilated." [125] Marxism reveals the catastrophe. Benjamin, a visionary in his turn, points to the extermination camps to come, but he presents them as intended for the victims of a repressed collectivity. The place of the Prague writer's work must be purely complementary, as is Klee's work, on the margins of reality. Nothing in it is reincarnated in behaviors or survives in consciousness, as is the case in the 1934 Essay. The terrors have grown darker. There remain flight and the introduction of an illusory complement—a pure antithesis, fictional and not real, the product of art.

In the critical part of the June 12 letter, Benjamin lets himself be drawn toward a new form of dialectic, even more pessimistic. The tradition in which Kafka found refuge is sick; it no longer contains any wisdom capable of helping humanity; there is no longer any solid truth. He has to say it: "a negative characterization probably is altogether more fruitful than a positive one." [126] The content is adapted to the catastrophic political situation. Thus the problem of the incomprehensibility of Kafka's texts, underlined by Brecht, is easily resolved. Kafka clung to tradition, but without retaining any truth or dogma. He chose the *hagada*, gloss, rather than *halakha*, law. The parables had to be maintained and legitimized without the help of any referential foundation. Is he not in the process of staging a trial that concerns himself? Benjamin retains two residues from the old productions of decomposition, rumor, and Don Quixote-style madness. These seem to him to be adapted to the course of history. It is in this altered form that he now identifies the strangeness of Kafka's stories. [127]

The indignation and scorn provoked in Benjamin by Brod's biography continue to fester. Benjamin returns to them again the following year in a letter to Scholem: "I think I am on the track of the truth when I say: Kafka as Laurel felt the onerous obligation to seek out his Hardy." [128] Here again, nothing is in harmony with the strategic positions taken earlier in favor of Brod. Benjamin holds the bow, Scholem applauds from a distance; they amuse themselves by shooting down an absent target. After all, doesn't humor carry the day in Kafka? Does he himself not represent the comic vein, which was not unknown in the Jewish tradition? "I think the key to Kafka's work is likely to fall into the hands of the person who is able to extract the comic aspects from Jewish theology. Has there been such a man? Or would you be man enough to be that man?" [129] The grotesque is in the grotesque; the relationship between the letter-writers can henceforth be likened to a farce worthy of Aristophanes.

Kafka did not consider all his efforts fruitless. Benjamin presumed that he did; he thought he had found proof of this in the terms of his will. [130] The opinion is widespread today: "Kafka remained for Benjamin the figure par excellence of the failure." Bouretz writes, retranslating this observation: it was a "way of evading the exegesis of his own parables." [131] He analyzed the writing while including failure in the enterprise, whatever it may have been. However, failures are elements on the same basis as successes. The difficulty of reading is transferred to the difficulty that the author could have experienced, can be attributed, we are told, to a pathological state. One ought to say instead that Kafka included failure in the action in an exemplary fashion. The invention and the composition of his stories impose this observation, which does not authorize us to say that he did not devote himself essentially to it. However, he did not write, either, in order to put failure at the center of human existence. This would be a religious point of view, inspired by the fall; he simply incorporated failure for its truth,

necessary counterpoint to his writing and his thought, far from any preconceived system, even from any experience at : What has to be considered and examined in depth everywhere, in reading him, is of the order of correlation.

...

Benjamin expected a great deal from the completion of his book project. [132] It would have freed him from his depend on Horkheimer and the Institute for Social Research. He said he was ready to go to Palestine to write the book, if neces But Salman Schocken had never been really interested either in Brod's work or in those of an adversary such as Benjan Scholem had not convinced him, which was something Scholem could not tell his friend. Scholem wrote in his memoirs from a man like Schocken he would have expected genuine comprehension for a mind like Benjamin's. In the end, Sch must have observed that Schocken, quite to the contrary, "made fun of [Benjamin's] writings and gave me a lecture in v he declined to support Benjamin, concluding that Benjamin was something like a bogeyman of my own invention." [135] do not know, either, how he had presented the project, with which he was not fully pleased himself. Benjamin was far fr being engaged in the same cause; for Scholem, Zionism came first by a long stretch. Hannah Stern (that is, Arendt), to Benjamin described the situation, no doubt had the last word, which Benjamin communicated to his friend: she "was of mitigating opinion that Schocken thinks more of Brod alone, in the depths of his soul, than of you and me put together." Thus everything was false and to a great extent dissimulated.

Scholem apparently did not want to hear anything about a failure, which offended his faith. In his letter of November 6–1938, he played the fool, as he well knew how to do (I once saw him make the gesture with his hand and his finger): "I v really like to know what you mean by that." He could not understand (either he was playing the fool or else he really wa: if he didn't understand ...) what disconcerted Benjamin, nor could he see that the latter was caught in the vise of a contradiction: "you really seem to understand [Kafka's] failure as something unexpected or bewildering ... , whereas the simple truth [is] that the failure was the object of endeavors that, if they were to succeed, would be bound to fail" (this is virtually to observe, with irony, a "correlation"). This amounts to calling into question the very idea of failure, as Benjami construed it. [135] For him, on the contrary, this was the main if not the only interest that supported the project, which v marked at that point, in 1938, by a negativity that reflected the political situation. His feelings got the upper hand in the the events he saw taking place and the anticipation of the troubles to come. History was winning out over religion.

## Celan's response

Paul Celan read Benjamin's 1935 collection of essays (*Schriften*) very closely and his text on Kafka, in particular. The publication of his "annotations" in *La Bibliothèque Philosophique / Die philosophische Bibliothek* [136] makes it possible to spot the passages that caught his attention. They seem sometimes visibly to form the motive or the subject matter of p with points of agreement and, more often, of contradiction. His reading is dated 1959, [137] but it is clear that Celan we to it later and, in particular, at the time of the May 1968 demonstrations, when he was living in the Latin Quarter, on the Tournefort near the École Normale. He saw himself in Kafka, and indeed for Celan Kafka was a unique model.

I came across Celan's reading of the Essay, as part of his creative work as a poet, under quite special circumstances. V participated together in the earliest demonstrations at the beginning of May 1968. Then there was the aftermath. Certain correspondences between these critical poems and my own research emanate from a reflection that I undertook separ: a time when Benjamin's image was evolving: his prestige was growing, even as he was changing sides. Derrida's Benja no longer the same as Szondi's. Celan's reactions and his clarifications avoid all identification with any particular tender They underline the differences between his highly personal approach to Benjamin and that of other readers.

The Benjaminean series is closely linked with the Essay, and is not merged with the strong presence of Kafka in the wor which one could first of all cite "In Prag" ("In Prague," *GW*, 2:63) and "Von der Orchis her," which follows ("Starting from Orchis," *GW*, 2:64), and "Frankfurt, September" (*GW*, 2:114). [138]

In the collections published during Celan's lifetime or in the posthumous work, [139] one can identify five places where positions defended by Benjamin in his Kafka essay are discussed. The reactions on the occasion of a reading (already c and preparatory) shed light on the poetic responses that he is drafting. They refer to one or more passages in the Essay were noted between May and July 1968. They are, in the chronological order in which they were written:

1. "Wallslogan," in *Snowpart* ("Mauerspruch," *GW*, 2:371), May 26.
2. "24, rue Tournefort," in the posthumous poems collected in *Gedichte aus dem Nachlass* (Celan 2003 [hereafter *G*: June 6.
3. "From the moorfloor," in *Snowpart* ("Aus dem Moorboden," *GW*, 2:239), July 19.
4. "Now grows" ("Jetzt wächst," *GN*:203), July 26.
5. "Venality" ("Bestechlichkeit," *GN*:228), July 29.

The very day when Celan composed (among others) the poem "From the moorfloor" (July 19), he wrote a very harsh dia

against Benjamin, “Port Bou—Deutsch?” (“Port Bou—German?” *GN*:187), on which I have published a comment. [140] reading has often been found shocking, judged “subjective.” I was thought to have lent Celan hostile sentiments that he not had. This is not the case. It suffices to understand the words. Celan’s attack is virulent; it is, however, neither absolute nor radical. Celan recognized Benjamin’s importance perfectly well, despite their divergences. This double gaze can be contrasted to the one he turned on Adorno; he, too, had often disappointed Celan. The poems targeted one of the aspects of the relationship. They responded to the vision that he could have had about the author, given his own positions. It is Celan, the archer, who sets up his target. “subjective.” He sets up his target.

Several years earlier, in 1960, in Celan’s Büchner Prize speech in Darmstadt, Benjamin had been honored precisely with a citation from the essay that paid tribute to the name of Kafka. In a passage in *Der Meridian* (*The Meridian*), [141] “attentiveness” in fact, in question (the word is found in one of the poems); it results from a concentration of the mind, at a distance from the world of images. Benjamin, at the end of the section of his Essay titled “The Little Hunchback,” had written: “Even if Kafka does 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.” [142] He attributed this reflection to the wisdom of peoples, residing in a ground (*Grund*) that cannot go back only to mythic apprehension or existential theology—in this case, one has to go farther back, to the origins which show that such popular sentiment is common to all people, valid for the Germans, of whom he has just cited a tradition of saying, and for the Jews as well. [143] Benjamin’s citation is spurred by a sentence from Malebranche, through a characteristic literary detour. All that has been said by another is retained, whether it is accepted or rejected. One may think that the indication added, in *The Meridian*, “according to Walter Benjamin’s Kafka essay,” was intended to show that the idea of “natural piety” was inspired in him by Kafka; this is confirmed in the versions of the speech in which Celan had specifically quoted [the sentence by Malebranche] from the article originally published in the *Jüdische Rundschau*.” [144] The place of publication was the equivalent of an agreement, denouncing self-abandonment and assimilation, at the same time as that of an indistinct ground of common saintliness (the date of the reading, December 11, 1959, preceded by very little the period in which Celan was preparing his Darmstadt speech; the invitation reached him on March 14, 1960).

Israel Chalfen, in his biographical account of Celan’s youth, notes, on the basis of several interviews he conducted with witnesses, that “Kafka, once discovered [around 1937; Celan was seventeen years old], was to hold him in a spell all his life.” [145] According to his friend Ruth Lackner, Kafka had become his daily reading matter in his mature years. He was perhaps the author with whom Celan was the most closely intimate. Celan’s mother, fleeing from the Russian troops during the 1918 war, had spent three years in Bohemia. Reference is made to this stay in the poem “Es ist alles anders” (“Everything is different”).

what is it called, your country  
behind the mountain, behind the year?  
I know what it’s called.  
Like the winter’s tale, it is called,  
it’s called like the summer’s tale,  
your mother’s three yearland, that’s what it was,  
what it is,  
it wanders off everywhere, like language,  
throw it away, throw it away,  
then you’ll have it again, like that other thing,  
the pebble from  
the Moravian hollow  
which your thought carried to Prague,  
on to the grave on to the graves, into life. [146]

Here we have the kernel of an imaginary genealogy, created out of whole cloth, at once poetic and Jewish. His mother is gone there before she had her child (born in 1920), who would be a poet. She was impregnated by the country; she bore a living being, whom she did not know. Thus in a letter written in 1962 to Klaus Wagenbach (who knew the work of the Prague writer well), at the time he was composing the poem, Celan could present himself in this lineage: “for me as a Kafkaian, waiting to be brought into the world as such” (“für mich nachzugebärender Kaf[is]kanier” [147]). In the poem “Frankfurt, September,” a dying Kafka meets Freud, who is also dying—in a similar way [148]; Kafka sets himself apart, strenuously distancing himself from psychology: “for the last time.” Such was Celan’s rejection of Benjamin.

Celan returned to these Bohemian origins in a letter to Franz Wurm on April 29, 1968, in the context of the Prague Spring: “I am myself ‘Bohemianized,’ as you know quite well; this goes back to my mother’s three-year stint in Bohemia ... : it is called ‘lupine’ but rather ‘wolfsbean’ [German “Wolfsbohne” instead of “Lupine”] ... , then again on one side (see ‘In Prague’ (and on another side, and on yet another).” He is referring to a poem that his interlocutor could not have known: the poem “Wolfsbohne” appeared in the posthumous collection. There we find, in lines 14–20, the following: “... Which / flower, nr hurt you there [in Ukraine] / with its name? / You, mother, who said *Wolfsbean*, not: / Lupine.” [150]

...

**Wallslogan**

Disfigured—an angel, anew, stops dead—  
a face comes to itself,

the astral—  
weapon with  
the memoryshaft:  
attentively, it greets  
its  
thinking lions. [151]

Celan had initially added to the title the specification “for Paris.” This was not an additional motto that would have to be reconstituted by readers (how could they manage to do so?). Celan noted and retained certain of these inscriptions, for example, in his correspondence with Wurm. [152] The date May 26, 1968, establishes the epilogue of the days of revolt end of a period of freedom. The city of the Commune has met Versailles. It is forced to learn once again to work with its opponent. Inebriation meets its total inversion. Everything has two faces. The reader is to retain from this that the motto concerns the event of the month of May, its glory and its decline, and the reader discovers that the word “face” or “visa (*Gesicht*), applies here to vision, which has prevailed during this period, and not to the face alone; the values are merge face recovers its meaning and its mission; it recognizes itself in its disfigurement and the fatal exhaustion of a liberating illusion.

The words of the interpolation are a reduction of the last lines of Benjamin’s essay on Karl Kraus, which preceded the K essay in the edition of the *Schriften* that Celan was reading. [153] The poem is associated, not without irony, with a story the Talmud recalled by Benjamin, in which countless angels, recreated by God at every moment, sing and then depart. In his essay on Kafka, their ephemeral existence was supposed to evoke their infinite flexibility and the diversity of Kraus’s interventions. In Paris, at the present time, the angel has been making himself heard on the pavement, in the marches a meeting rooms before disappearing. The angel encounters his own face in its disfigurement.

The duality comes from Bohemia; it is taught in the city of Paris by an event that is taking place at the same time elsewhere. The poet’s attention is directed toward the city of Prague, toward the markedly more cruel threat that weighs on the city. The city will become aware of this when it is crushed. Russian tanks will strike in the summer. The lions of the Prague emblem will recall the threat; they appear in the correspondence with Franz Wurm [154]; the Czechs have forgotten neither the failures nor the sufferings of their history. With “thinking,” there is once again an appeal to memory, which is re-marks the consideration of historical objects. The poet, with the weapon of his astral art, [155] “salutes” from afar the place of Jewish origins [156]; he rejoins a Jewish Bohemia in the Latin Quarter.

From Benjamin, Celan moved on to all the slogans translating the revolts and expectations that had been disappointed at the May event. The truths they find, when they have expressed themselves, are as numberless as the angels; having expressed themselves, they cancel themselves out. They had to speak, in multiple adages; they had to be spoken and contradicted, distorted by repression. The relation to the angels of Klee’s *Angelus Novus* tradition takes on its full meaning in the context of the repetition of an erasure.

The poem redefines in every circumstance a power that confirms it. What does poetry do in the face of all these denegations? It moves in the most radical duality, aspiring to astral light without leaving the world of destruction. Its “arm” (one may hear, too, the French *âme* [soul] in the translation of “Waffe”) is like a shotgun, aimed at its target, its barrel charged with munition of memory. This is what makes it indestructible: no wound is forgotten. The gaze resting on the multitude of men allows the poet to reassure himself. Recalling the role granted to attention in *The Meridian*, [157] he salutes history in its cruelty, in Prague and in the Jewish past, both present in solidarity in the memory of the “lions.”

...

**24 Rue Tournefort**

You and your  
kitchensink German—yes, sink—  
yes, before—ossuaries.

Say: Löwig. Say: *Shiviti*.

The black cloth  
 they lowered before you,  
 when your breath  
 swelled scarward,  
  
 brothers too, you stones,  
 image the wordshut behind  
 side glances. [158]

The number 24, the street number, was added after the fact. A possible interpretation of this addition might be based on the poem "Zwölf Jahre" ("Twelve years"), from *Die Niemandsrose* (GW, 1:220). These are not twelve additional years since but Celan may have measured a second dozen differently. The years, more troubled, marked by accidents, could express that way a different temporality, a duration of another weight.

The first two stanzas are addressed to the familiar "you," to the hand that is writing; they admonish it. What is the poet after all, but laundering the language of the torturers in order to lead it up to the charnel house and amend it in that way takes blackness and whitens it. This amounts to casting a sarcastic gaze on one's own writing. Now there is a more direct, more autonomous way to proceed, by coming back to one's personal origins, rather than moving through the victims and those piled-up corpses. It will be less combative, but it will avoid a detour; monstrosity sticks to the words. The return to self, dated June 6, is connected with the earlier poem in *Schneepart* (*Snowpart*) written on May 26, which includes the emblem of Prague. This is also the lion of Judah. In a desperately violent poem in *Fadensonnen* (*Threadsunns*), Celan has addressed the lion that he was, asking him to sing the song of men, the Jews, "the humansong /of tooth and soul," of the "hardnesses" (the response and the victims). [159] The symbols merge and reinforce one another; this amounts to declaring that other traditions are available to the poet, going back to Kafka, and before him the Prague cemetery, no less Jewish German-speaking. He can recover a purer identity, less altered by the struggle against the adversary. The lion that emblemizes Prague and the Jews leads to verse 8 of Psalm 16: "I have set the Lord always before me." The word *chi* bearing the rejection of false gods in its trajectory, had become a principle of Jewish law, [160] which Celan transfers. The "I" is freed in the gap, by separating itself from an indefinite task of redressing; it teaches the "you" to speak once again first something true, something Jewish, not something in re-Judaized German, and behind it, you find the ancient profane of faith, Jewishness in Hebrew, '*chiviti*' directly ahead."

In her commentary, Barbara Wiedemann informs the reader that this June 6th is the birthday of Celan's son Eric (Celan). They could have celebrated his bar mitzvah. One wonders whether the analysis of the poem's language is likely to serve transference that she imagines, assuming that Celan could even have thought of it. The reference to the Psalms that she introduces would, according to this rather incredible logic, be related to the reading of the section from the *Books of Maccabees* that was reserved for this Sabbath, as was the case every week. It would have been recited in part by the boy in the synagogue; the Hebrew word cited (*shiviti*) being reproduced on an "image" adorning the pulpit of the reciter (one would imagine Eric standing next to the *hazan*, the cantor). To construct a religious staging for a synagogue, Wiedemann had access to notes Celan had taken in a notebook, on the occasion of an exhibit at the Petit Palais, "Israel through the Ages," which he apparently visited on May 25, 1968 (the date inscribed on the catalogue). Here one reads that "*shiviti* is the first word of Psalm 16. It means 'I put before,' 'I see,' 'I imagine.'" [161] One could see three objects designated under the name *Shiviti*. Clearly, external information of this sort can lead to error and misuse; it becomes a practical obstacle to a "reading" without the name. Only a deciphering can call forth and legitimize references of this nature; without this, the references remain gratuitous and mute. They ask to be situated.

The "they" in line 6 of the poem does not refer to anything actually mentioned. It refers to the "others," the adversaries, who are all the more daunting for the "you," whose eyes are fixed on the "scar," in that he meets them along his road, traces memory. The black flag (which could also be harmonized with the content of the Psalm cited) obscures the darkness of the event. The "Reds," and among them the Stalinists, all Jews, are the ones who are, with their words, in the end strangely in harmony with the assassins' slogans. (This is perhaps also the blackness of anarchy, recuperated, distorted.)

What kills are the images. We understand the fourth stanza, which is addressed from this angle directly to the words, to the "stones" with which the poems are made: the plural "you" (*vous*) is addressed to them. We thus return to the meaning embodied in the syntactic rhythm; we realize that the "brothers" target the pseudo-allies, the authors of evil, traitors to the cause, which the stones are obliged to recognize in their own camp ("also": the declared enemies are not the only ones to become aware of what is happening around them, of the so-called good side. These are the "friends"; they have been caught in by false solidarities, and have left behind the straight and narrow path (*shiviti*). These lamentations are corroborated in the letters that were written on the same days.

...

**From the Moorfloor**

From the moorfloor to  
 climb into the sans-image,  
 a hemo  
 in the gun barrel hope,  
 the aim, like impatience, of age,  
 in it.  
 Village air, rue Tournefort. [162]

...

Celan read in Benjamin's essay on Kafka: "No other writer has obeyed the commandment 'Thou shalt not make unto th graven image' so faithfully." [163] He found there something like the definition of his language and its liberating and ultr superlative power. [164] Vertical polarity defines the utopia that is being constructed in the essay. It is now anchored in entirely different story. It is not the swamp of matriarchal promiscuity that Benjamin read in *The Castle*. Celan counters I with the vision of a different sexuality, which would be upright, male, and determined. The gun barrel has the shape of t masculine member. It is charged with representing sex, which is not lost in oblivion; in becoming erect, it remembers. T political hope turns out to be transferred into the non-forgetting of the acts of violence. Blood has flowed; it brings the p ammunition; "hemo" is the essential ingredient in hemoglobin. [165]

The blood of massacres orients the undertaking toward a future. The localization that is accomplished in the text makes surpassing visible. It takes place at the center of the gaze, turned toward the past. Suffering is transformed into a "targe unique by virtue of a transmutation, which will have liberated messianism from any theological charge. Born of the expe of history and of their non-forgetting, it is conceived as the negation of Benjamin's visions. The German term "mündig" from "Mund," mouth), rests on a very free semantic transposition. The mouth "speaks"; the verb "münden" (to flow into evoking the mouth of a river, moreover, translates a result (it contains the evocation of an "opening into," an estuary); th less idiomatic use of the verb "mündigen," two pages earlier in the same collection, [166] presupposes a value close to "preparing to release." [167] The semantic creations are neologisms, perhaps; they are extensions, which do not have r do with "the majority" (*Mündigkeit*), itself consigned, according to the dictionaries, to the place of an idiomatic lexicon. The context makes it possible to grasp the reforms introduced into the language. The fact that death, the outpouring of "blood," affirms its presence in the orbit of sexuality and offers something like an outcome is not at all surprising. It is a constant in Celan's love poetry, from the earliest collections on.

Celan forcefully underlines a sentence from Benjamin's essay in which there is a reference to the "air of the village": "In Kafka,' said Soma Morgenstern, 'there is the air of a village, as with all great founders of religions.'" [169] Kafka's short "The Next Village," leads Benjamin, perhaps too quickly (and superficially), [170] to bring in Lao-Tse, associating a good attraction of proximity—with the advice not to move. Celan, however, distinguishes between the two authors: no, Kafka an author of parables, he did not found a religion. Benjamin retained only the village, thus passing to *The Castle* and fro there to the legend of a princess relegated to a village, which according to the Talmud symbolizes the body. Benjamin ti returns, via this detour, to Kafka's world and his theme. In his village in *The Castle*, K. represents the contemporary mar risks seeing his body get away from him. Alienation has returned (along with insects). It is that air, that village that sprea Kafka, in "A Country Doctor," as well as in *The Castle*. "The air is permeated with all the abortive and override elements form such a putrid mixture." [171] Celan retains the context of what he reads, including the consonances. He reads: "Th the air that Kafka had to breathe throughout his life." Whatever the interpretation supplied by the essay may be, it is the Prague air that comes to "turn powerfully" (*turner fort*), with the lions. In the word *Dorfluft*, "village air," there is the sex of *The Castle* and the presence of repression. These are not mutually exclusive. The swamps are there; we hear *Torf* (pe *Dorf*, the village. Power is anchored in the return and the reversals: by turning, "one comes back there."

**Now Your Weight Grows**

Made heavy by all the lightnesses

now you unmask  
 the imitation, which is  
 nameless.

now you send the syllable-

stabbing steam hammers  
 under the spur  
 of the one who  
 leaps over  
 the treacherous wood in the hedgerows,

now  
 you write. [172]

Benjamin conceives of Kafka in the framework of the “ages of the world” (*Weltalter*), opposing them to Lukacs’s temporal ages: “On many occasions ... Kafka’s figures clap their hands. Once, the casual remark is made that these hands are ‘r steam hammers.’” [173]

Celan’s reworking circumscribes the last word, which is introduced in Kafka’s story “Up in the Gallery.” [174] Its structure contrasts two panels: the alternating applause of a circus audience gives rhythm to the delirium that is aroused by the horsewoman on the track. Benjamin comments: the slightest gesture in Kafka shifts eons (*Weltalter*). This is not in the story. The ecstasy is at its peak. A complementary tableau, evoking a well-ordered artistic production, will follow for Celan. Benjamin insists: “once, it is said that hands evoke ages of the world.” [175] In Kafka’s context, it is not even the gesture counts, but the exasperation.

As he often does, Celan preserves the surroundings, read or cited. Here he goes back to the story, with the magnificent applause, but also with the horse on the track, with its leaps. The ecstasy is transferred to the poet. The familiar “you struggles and gets carried away; he affirms himself against falsity, against mockery and diversions, sustained by all the violence that the hammer impresses on the cavalcade. One might see that he is again taking Kafka’s side, that he is defending the author against a distortion that he is undergoing.

Art is redefined, as in the poem “Bei Wein und Verlorenheit,” [176] which serves as a reference. It catches up with his in a hurry. Mockery is hunted down: the adverb *nämlich* lies in the orbit of the “name.” The word *Namen* has to be analyzed semantically anew, as is the case with *heimlich*. This is semblance, deprived of real “names” (the words that say the truth called “names”). The troupe of these specters, false Celanian, prowls around the poet. He does not manage to get rid of them but he knows how to catch them, with Kafka’s help. Again we find the cavalcade and the obstacles. This time the poet manages to attach the proper, powerful syllables of ecstasy to the spurs of the rider who mounts the machine-animal and controls it. The word is situated in the orbit of war machines (see above, “Wallslogan”) and of a poem like “Sperrtonnensprache.” [177] The betrayal is thus denounced, “de-sliced” (torn away from ecstasy), annulled. The result is victorious. One “writes” in one’s own time—the “now” as constitutive as the *hic*—and in abundance, even if it is against the shades of counter-fashioning.

...

### Venality

this is not a hope,  
 norms, also called prehistoric world,  
 get stuck in the sand on the near side  
 of liberty.

Transmitted is  
 the secret beginning  
 in its opening.

Did the coin fall at your place?  
 In mine,  
 the neighboring village mounted  
 on my horse  
 where the pebble was supposed  
 to be put down,  
 the mountain suckled its tree  
 raising it in the conversation. [178]

In the last collections, where the poems, annotated and composed, are presented as a poetic “journal,” Celan takes a path in two directions, sometimes tending toward Kafka’s side, sometimes rather against Benjamin. The most direct attack concerning the Essay can perhaps be read in “Venality” (“Bestechlichkeit”), one of the poems dated July 27, 1968, in which

sentences that Benjamin had drawn from Kafka's *Trial* are turned around: "A boundless corruptibility is not their worst for their essence is such that their venality is the only hope held out to the human spirit facing them." [179] The "norms" back just as much to the description provided of the prehistoric world: "Laws and definite norms remain unwritten in the prehistoric world." [180] The qualification "also called preworld" (*auch Vorwelt genannt*) adds a good dose of sarcasm.

In the second stanza, Celan resolutely corrects Benjamin: no, what he himself, in his ego, is attached to is a "self," a belonging, a form of dependence on the self that makes it possible to advance into the opening and to expose oneself to dangers. It is to designate an inalienable core of one's person. The other, the poet, who writes, is beside him, with his machine. The penny (*Groschen*) could fall into the slot and make the usual mechanism of creation turn. The "I" explains distinguishes itself; it intervenes to explain itself by a self-doubling. The poem, which is being written by the other, is in fabricated in a little office reserved for the ego. The classic situation of a gathering in the next village of "A Country Doc reversed. The hostile population has mounted the doctor's horse. How could the mother's stone, perpetuating her merr have then been brought to Prague, as was indicated in the poem "Everything is different" (in *The No One's Rose*), where force of this transfer was evoked. The stone was something German, nothing else. It came from the low country, from the basin that stretches into Moravia; transformed in memory, it was transferred (see above p. 399, lines 49–52 of this poem it is no longer true, according to this detour, rethought in the light of the attachment of the self, confining oneself in the person. The mountain has been left behind in line 40; now it bars the road to poetry, which is always going about but and evading (*bergen*) to nourish the tree of death that is rising up, contrasting the tombs of Prague, in line 52 of the poem cited, with "life"; death plays against another death.

The "I" is eclipsed. His solitary project of carrying the stone cannot be realized. The adversaries have gotten together on horse; he is surrounded; the mountain, which buries, weans the other from death (one can also hear silence, *Stille*, in *St suckle*), makes it quiet. One no longer has a "subject" to deal with, but rather an encounter that opens onto an identify reflection. There is a good chance that one can (or must) reunite the mountain and the conversation in order to find, once again, the problems raised in relation to Adorno, the absent party in "Gespräch im Gebirg" ("Conversation in the Mountain" [181] at a distance from the songs. The charges are distinguished.

The vertical line that can be discerned in Kafka's emblem, regularly reiterated: "fall and climb" (*fallen und steigen*), trans the dissociation between the "you" and the "I"; here it separates the studies from the instances of poetic creation. The "I" recalls for itself the role that is imparted to it by the tradition to which it knows it is attached, and it seems to exhaust its seeking to elevate its own personal experience to this level of "conversation." This thought suffices to compromise the triumphant accents in "Everything's different" (see line 46), during the trip in the mother's country, "like the language" ("Sprache").

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## Footnotes

[ back ] \* Originally published as "Benjamin devant Kafka," in: H. Wismann, P. Lavelle, eds., *Walter Benjamin, le critique européen* (Lille, 2010), pp. 213–277.

[ back ] 1. To measure the changes that have occurred, I am taking the sentences, chosen from the most varied domain which the Frankfurt newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* invited readers to comment during the summer of 2007 (2009).

[ back ] 2. In the foreword to her collection of essays on Benjamin, Sigrid Weigel (2013) uses the formula "neither theolo nor secular"; she prefers the term "postbiblical" (xxii). Detaching Benjamin from theology, she does not situate him, any than Hans Blumenberg does, within the process of secularization that Blumenberg defined and critiqued (Blumenberg 1 see Weigel 2013:xxiii). In the interpretations cited by Benjamin, Weigel thinks she can recognize *theologoumena* [TN: theological statements of opinion as opposed to doctrinal pronouncements] encompassed in a secularization from whic Benjamin distances himself.

[ back ] 3. Kafka 1971:457.

[ back ] 4. “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death” (Benjamin 1999d [1934]). For the original German, see Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 2:409–438, and notes, 2, pt. 3:1153–1276. Schweppenhäuser 1981 is a very useful pocket editor includes Benjamin’s essays and notes on Kafka along with excerpts from his correspondence with G. Scholem, T. W. Adorno and W. Kraft on the subject of Kafka. [TN: In our translation of Jean Bollack’s article, we follow the author’s practice of frequently referring to Benjamin’s piece on Kafka as the Essay.]

[ back ] 5. Volume 1 in Brod’s 1935 edition brought together everything that Kafka had published in his lifetime under the title *Erzählungen*.

[ back ] 6. In a radio program in 1931 about the volume of stories that had just appeared (Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 2:676–680; notes, 1978, 2, pt. 3:1155–1177, 1458–1460; cf. Kafka 1970). The text includes a whole series of elements that were taken up again in the 1934 essay.

[ back ] 7. Benjamin 2012:279. In a note appended to this letter, Scholem remarked that “this is the first indication of Walter Benjamin’s interest in Kafka, which WB maintained until the end” (280). According to U. Steiner (2010:132), this was one of the earliest traces in Benjamin’s work of a reading of Kafka, after the appearance of the collection *Ein Landarzt (A Country Doctor)* in 1928.

[ back ] 8. Benjamin 2012:336 (letter to Scholem, May 28, 1928). Among the novels, he had read *The Trial*: “As a minister of justice, I have Kafka at my bedside. I am reading *The Trial*” (Benjamin 1995–2000, 3:303, letter of Nov. 18, 1927). In the March 1928 letter to Scholem, Benjamin mentioned that Kafka was to be part of a book project that would bring together several essays.

[ back ] 9. Mariani-Zini 2004: “Benjamin reads Kafka like a philologist coming to grips with an unknown language ... even the smallest detail is an indicator and not a sign, and comprehension is not given at the outset” (13). See also Jennings 1988: “The essential thematic concerns ... are dictated by close reading of a broad spectrum of Kafka’s texts ...” (200). I wonder if he really followed this path. Mosès limits himself, on the contrary, to ambivalence: “Benjamin’s hermeneutics ... leads to a type of critical critique in which are mingled, almost indissociably, elements of *interpretation* and elements of *projection*” (2006:94). Manifestly, rather the second. [TN: Unless otherwise indicated, the translations provided here and throughout this chapter are from the French text cited by Bollack.]

[ back ] 10. Pulliero 2005.

[ back ] 11. Mosès 2006:94; he speaks of *configurations* applying to Benjamin’s thought in connection with the interview with Brecht on “The Next Village” (see Wismann and Lavelle 2010:45–48), as much as to the “logic proper to the text studied”; the logic proper to the text was purportedly found in the figure of its composition. Does one also find “the thought” there?

[ back ] 12. See Benjamin 2006b.

[ back ] 13. See Benjamin 2012:585–592 (letter to Adorno, December 9, 1938), where Benjamin defends his way of proceeding.

[ back ] 14. See above, p. 258.

[ back ] 15. See the notes: “Schemata, Dispositionen und Aufzeichnungen” (Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 3:1205–1248).

[ back ] 16. One justification of the procedure, among others, appears in the defense, against Adorno, of the idea of translation with regard to Baudelaire. This idea has its empirical place in “Le flâneur,” and it can be corroborated by a contextualization of Edgar Allan Poe. [TN: Baudelaire translated many of Poe’s poems for publication.] The reuse of the subject dealt with here is anticipated for another section, where it will receive a dazzling clarification (Benjamin 2012:585–592, letter to Adorno, December 9, 1938).

[ back ] 17. In Bouretz 2010, in a chapter devoted to Benjamin (“Walter Benjamin [1892–1940]: The Angel of History and the Experience of the Century,” 165–233), see the section dedicated to the Essay, “Revelation in Kafka’s World” (172–179): “It remained for Benjamin the figure par excellence of the failure: by his refusal to answer the questions he raised ...” (178). Always failure, as if this had not been introduced by Kafka as an element of his compositions.

[ back ] 18. See below, p. 293.

[ back ] 19. See below, pp. 277–281, for the Essay; as for Kafka, there is already a brief doxographic summary in the Essay itself (Benjamin 1999d:806). Benjamin distinguished two tendencies, one natural (H. Kaiser), the other supernatural, and often chosen (H. J. Schoeps, B. Rang, Groethuysen, W. Haas, without forgetting Brod); both tendencies miss the truth, but can be deduced from the “motifs” and which leads to the collective experience of the prehistoric. Kafka “could only describe what presented itself to him, coming from who knows where” (Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 2:425).

[ back ] **20.** “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (Benjamin 1996d:67).

[ back ] **21.** See “Brod und Kafka” in the preliminary notes (Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 3:1221: “There is something that Kafka and Proust have in common, and who knows whether that something is found anywhere else. It has to do with the use they make of the ‘ego.’”)

[ back ] **22.** Their friendship began in July 1915; see Scholem 1975:193. As already indicated, the first mention of Kafka in Benjamin’s correspondence occurs in a letter to Gershom Scholem dated July 21, 1925 (Benjamin 2012:279–280).

[ back ] **23.** J. Unseld (1994) describes the situation in 1922, when Kafka was writing *The Castle*: “The German literary world had in his experience remained closed to him; in order to break out of the anonymity that he had suffered, greater effort would have to be expended. Kafka therefore chose a path via his closest friends” (231). In contrast, U. Steiner, along with G. Binder, recalls that in certain circles his fame was exceptional (Steiner 2010:132). The divergent appreciations depend on each critic’s point of view.

[ back ] **24.** See his letter to Scholem, April 8, 1939 (Benjamin 2012:600–603).

[ back ] **25.** The poem attached to Scholem’s letter of July 9, 1934 (Benjamin 2012:445–447) is discussed by Benjamin in 20 (448–451).

[ back ] **26.** He returned there in 1936 and 1938.

[ back ] **27.** On Judaism in the intellectual milieu in Prague, see Pulliero 2005:151–175. In the early part of the century, there was “a form of ideological reappropriation of a lost identity, following upon assimilation” (the formula is borrowed from Giulio 1984:3). Kafka witnessed the debates in which “Occidentals” were opposed to “Zionist trends”; see Pulliero 2005:238–275–277 (notes), where Kafka’s reservations about Martin Buber are expressed. Kafka did not belong to any of the circles that he followed the debates closely.

[ back ] **28.** In *Franz Kafka: Éléments pour une théorie de la création littéraire*, B. Lahire cites reflections from Kafka’s diary that call into question the existence of God (2010:126). This too is “noted” and thus situated in a sphere that is all the more essential, in that it remains structurally reflexive.

[ back ] **29.** See Lahire 2010:109–134, “Prague 1880–1924.”

[ back ] **30.** Cf. Scholem’s letter to Benjamin of August 1, 1931, reproduced with ample commentary in Scholem 1981:174.

[ back ] **31.** The famous theological declaration, as radical as possible, in Scholem’s August 1931 letter to Benjamin is important for the description of the status of Zionism. Kafka is invoked in order to contradict the promise made to Christians that for Scholem included the Marxist utopia.

[ back ] **32.** Scholem 1981:170 (the same letter). On March 7, Benjamin had written to Max Rychner that he had “little to do with the monuments erected by a Gundolf or a Bertram” (Benjamin 2012:371).

[ back ] **33.** Letter to Scholem, July 20, 1934 (Benjamin 2012:448).

[ back ] **34.** In the same letter, he opposes suspense in Kafka to the theological responses. From his own reading, Benjamin retains the scenic and gestural elements, which refer to the structure of a state of the world in which questions are set aside (*weggehoben*).

[ back ] **35.** The violence Benjamin exercises on his object, preferring the theological interpretation of Willy Haas, then that of Scholem, even as he readapts them, remains implicit in Steiner’s presentation (2010:133).

[ back ] **36.** “Franz Kafka: Eine Würdigung,” *Jüdische Rundschau* 39, nos. 102/103 and 104 (December 1934), including sections “Potemkin” and “Das bucklichte Männlein” (“The Little Hunchback”); cf. Tiedemann 1965:170.

[ back ] **37.** The Jewish encyclopedia (*Jüdisches Lexikon*, Hertz and Kirschner 1927) informs us that Robert “supported the orientation of Zionism (defended by Martin Buber in *A Land and Two Peoples* [Buber 1983]) taking into account the Arab demands in Palestine. The project of a binational state has been violently contested but has also exercised great influence. Robert Weltsch published *Rundschau* starting in 1919.

[ back ] **38.** In the preparatory notes (GS II, 3:1220), Benjamin speculates that “perhaps Kafka looked at Brod and his description of Jewish philosophemes the way Sancho Panza looked at Don Quixote.” See Scholem’s letter to Kraft on this subject (February 27, 1929): “Authoritative Kafka experts (such as Hugo Bergmann) also assure me that Brod’s description of Kafka in his book hits the mark, all the way down to the demonic details. It must be true, given the fact that Kafka’s friends had until

end a deep and abiding mistrust of Brod” (Scholem 2002:168). Scholem chose his side.

[ back ] 39. “Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope” (Benjamin 1996c:356; see Arendt 1968:1

[ back ] 40. Arendt 1968, 183–187.

[ back ] 41. “Zu Franz Kafka,” in Küpper 2006:543–557. (I have retained here, somewhat at random, Jennings, Mayer, P. and Weidner.) The article Weigel wrote for the *Handbuch* was included as a chapter in her monograph on Benjamin (2016:3) under the title “Jewish Thinking in a World Without God: Benjamin’s Reading of Kafka as a Critique of Christian and Jewish Theologoumena” (I refer here to the latter edition).

[ back ] 42. Mayer 1988:185–209. The article is dedicated to Gershom Scholem.

[ back ] 43. Alter 1991; the text consists of lectures given at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1990; Weidner 2000:249. (See p. 246: “Kafka is the author of a modernity that is not a loss of values, but marks the crisis in a form of tradition oscillating between extinction and transformation.” We are far from a reading, here.)

[ back ] 44. See Weigel 2013, especially Chap. 6, in particular the section titled “From the Midst of the Image World” (14) and the foreword: “with images [poetic language] concerns the survival of the cultic, sacred, and magical meanings” (x). This is Benjamin’s Kafka.

[ back ] 45. See Jennings 1988. Kafka is, with Baudelaire, the only writer whose aura is shown “*in the process of its decay*” the greatness of his work lies in its antitheses between the mystical tradition and the shock of its destruction, according to Jennings (207–208).

[ back ] 46. One can cite Deuring 1994 and Palmer 1999. Kafka’s texts are not simply self-referential. They refer to a premonition at what is buried in the depths; according to Palmer, this “applies to the work of Benjamin and Derrida. It is not only true for Kafka’s works as well, but not in as certain a fashion” (1999:48).

[ back ] 47. Palmier 2006. The author died in 1998.

[ back ] 48. Matz 2010, a review of the 2009 German translation.

[ back ] 49. Matz 2010.

[ back ] 50. Tackels 2009; see the appendix devoted to the Essay, 727–737.

[ back ] 51. Tackels 2009:730.

[ back ] 52. Bernoulli 1924.

[ back ] 53. Benjamin 2010:288 (letter to Scholem, January 14, 1926). Benjamin wrote as though he were in the situation of the addressee (who had been in Jerusalem for three years by then). He added that the “European” Institute of the University of Jerusalem should procure a copy of Bernoulli’s book.

[ back ] 54. See Adorno 2007:305, 307.

[ back ] 55. See “Johann Jakob Bachofen,” Benjamin 2002. According to a note by Scholem, the article was rejected (Benjamin and Scholem 1980, no. 55 [July 19, 1934]:151–153).

[ back ] 56. Benjamin 2012:450; also 452 (late July 1934?) and 479 (February 19, 1935). The text was sent to the publishing house Mercure de France, where Benjamin imagined it buried in a pile (Benjamin 2012:481–482, 1935).

[ back ] 57. Benjamin and Scholem 1989:126–127 (letter of July 17, 1934).

[ back ] 58. See Scholem 1981:1.

[ back ] 59. Scholem 1981:61.

[ back ] 60. See Steiner 2010:135; for “Fate and Character,” see Benjamin 1996b:201–206.

[ back ] 61. Adorno and Benjamin 1999:66–73.

[ back ] 62. Adorno and Benjamin 1999:104–114, letter of August 2–4, 1935: “the basic epistemological character of Kafka is identified, particularly in Odradek, as a commodity that has survived to no purpose” (108). On June 19, 1938, Benjamin mentions his new activities on the subject of Kafka and on Brod’s biography; he has “returned with great interest” to Adorno’s letter of December 17, 1934 in connection with his own notes on Kafka, “which take a different point of departure from

earlier essay" (260); on February 23, 1939, he discusses the comic and terrifying "type" in Balzac that was realized in K work (310–311).

[ back ] **63.** Letter of August 2–4, 1935 (Adorno and Benjamin 1999:110). "The disenchantment of the dialectical image [Golden Age] leads directly to purely mystical thinking, and, then Klages appears as a danger, just as Jung did before": / and Benjamin 1999:107; the two had been juxtaposed earlier in relation to collective consciousness).

[ back ] **64.** Benjamin to Scholem (Benjamin 2012:540): "it is my desire to safeguard certain [methodological] foundation *Paris Arcades* by waging an onslaught on the doctrines of Jung, especially those concerning archaic images and the unconscious." He was in full retreat.

[ back ] **65.** Brod 1921:1213; cited in the Essay, Benjamin 1999d:798.

[ back ] **66.** Brod 1960:75.

[ back ] **67.** "These words provide a bridge to those extremely strange figures in Kafka, the only ones who have escaped the family circle and for whom there may be hope" (Benjamin 1999d:798).

[ back ] **68.** Lavelle 2008:244-261.

[ back ] **69.** Benjamin 1996a:280–282.

[ back ] **70.** Benjamin 2006.

[ back ] **71.** Benjamin 1999c.

[ back ] **72.** Lavelle 2008:249.

[ back ] **73.** Jonas 2001.

[ back ] **74.** See the central announcement in the early pages of the Essay: "These assistants belong to a group of figure which recurs throughout Kafka's work" (Benjamin 1999d:798). Everything will be taken up again near the end, according musical principle of composition. In the end, with hindsight, "they have not yet been completely released from the woman nature," since "it is for them and their kind, the unfinished and the hapless, that there is hope" (798–799), transferred from entirely different "prehistoric world."

[ back ] **75.** Benjamin 1999d:799.

[ back ] **76.** Benjamin 1999d:799.

[ back ] **77.** Kafka 1970:153–161. The selection of major tales collected by Martin Walser was published as *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer* in the *Bibliothek Suhrkamp* in 1970; it was initially supposed to be titled *Er*.

[ back ] **78.** Benjamin 1999d:808. See also the reference to "Nachweise" in Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 3:1275.

[ back ] **79.** Paul Celan, "Sprich auch du" ("Speak—You Too"), Celan 2000 [hereafter *GW*] 1:135. Paul Celan, "Sprich—/schneide das Nein nicht vom Ja" ("Speak— / But don't split off No from Yes" [Celan 2001:77]). It is the meaning and the shadow of non-being. See also the poem "Stille!" ("Silence!"), in *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (Poppy and Memory), *GW* 1:75.

[ back ] **80.** See Benjamin 1999d:804.

[ back ] **81.** Benjamin 1999d:808.

[ back ] **82.** "Kavaliersmoral," Benjamin 1978, 4, pt.1:466–498. In a letter to Robert Weltsch, Benjamin invokes this intertext in favor of Brod, necessarily singling out his own reading of the work (Benjamin 2012:442).

[ back ] **83.** Franz Kafka, "The Silence of the Sirens" (1931), in Kafka 1971:430–432. This short story was included in the collection, *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer* (*The Great Wall of China*, 1970), where Benjamin read it. Later (in 1953), Benjamin had to refer to the second posthumous collection, *Wedding Preparations in the Country, and Other Stories* (*Hochzeitsvorbereitungen*; see Kafka 1979).

[ back ] **84.** Kafka 1971:432.

[ back ] **85.** In a chapter titled "Ulysse chez Kafka," Mosès (2006) studied this text along with others on the basis of formal analyses and codified schemas of literary composition (he refers frequently to Bakhtin). Form is substituted for an explicit content. Mosès proceeds at the expense of a study of the writing and the freedom of invention that asserts itself in writing, beyond predictable limits. The specific organization of the text is discovered much more in the reflection imposed

the reader and in the decoding provoked by the degree of enigmatization.

[ back ] **86.** See Benjamin 1999d.

[ back ] **87.** Benjamin 1999d.

[ back ] **88.** From Freud's treatise *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Benjamin drew the concepts with which collective memory in the experience of men of modernity could be mastered, a memory that is not based on conscious impressions. See Steiner 2010:163. See also Kahn 1998:73, who cites I. Wohlfarth on the extension to the social division of labor.

[ back ] **89.** See the copious annotations reproducing Benjamin's excerpts in Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 3:1153–1276, especially 1188–1264.

[ back ] **90.** See Adorno's letter of August 2–4, 1935 (Adorno and Benjamin 1999:104–114). Adorno was "keen, ardently to read the Essay: "We have all surely owed a redeeming word to Kafka," he wrote to Benjamin on December 5, 1934 (Adorno and Benjamin 2008:62).

[ back ] **91.** Letter to Adorno, July 29, 1931, in Adorno and Kracauer 2008:289.

[ back ] **92.** See Adorno 1967. Adorno suggested that he had been working on this text for some ten years (letter to Benjamin, December 17, 1934, in Adorno and Benjamin 1999:66); see the remarks by Kracauer, who deemed the essay one of the things Adorno had written (469–470). In his essay, Adorno stresses the importance of taking Kafka literally (Adorno 1967).

[ back ] **93.** See Adorno and Benjamin 1999:66–73 (Adorno to Benjamin, December 17, 1934).

[ back ] **94.** Adorno and Benjamin 1999:59–60 (Benjamin to Adorno, November 30, 1934). The beginning of the letter has survived, but the sending of the full manuscript was mentioned there (Adorno and Benjamin 1999:59–60).

[ back ] **95.** Kafka 1971:427–429. First published as "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" in *Ein Landarzt (A Country Doctor)* in 1919; it was republished by Brod in *Die Erzählungen* (1935).

[ back ] **96.** Benjamin 1999d:810–811. Two essential pages of the Essay are devoted to these creatures, witnesses to a world of oblivion and contemporaries of guilt.

[ back ] **97.** A whole series of figures is linked to this archetype (*Urbild*) of deformity. He is a "man who bows his head forward on his chest" (Benjamin 1999d:811).

[ back ] **98.** Benjamin 1999d:812.

[ back ] **99.** Adorno and Benjamin 1999:66–72 (letter of December 17, 1934). Heidegger was the reference: "truly a case where Heidegger put right side up" (69).

[ back ] **100.** Bouretz 2010:165–223.

[ back ] **101.** In Bouretz 2010, see the sections titled "The Little Hunchback," "Revelation in Kafka's World" (following Scholem), and "Tradition in the Shadow of the Castle" (168–185). Roughly half the chapter is devoted to the essay on Kafka by Scholem, for his part, thought that to understand the Kabbalah, one had to read Kafka's work (Scholem 1981:125). According to Bouretz, man in Kafka, as conceived by Benjamin, would be "in the presence of an unfathomable mystery"; even Odysseus ultimately "offers us nothing but the image of failure" (Bouretz 2010:176).

[ back ] **102.** Kraft lived in Paris as an émigré from October 1933 to July 1934. Benjamin met him there, before Kraft went back to Jerusalem.

[ back ] **103.** The relevant texts have been collected in Kraft 1968.

[ back ] **104.** See Kraft's letter of September 16, 1934, reproduced in the notes to the Essay (Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 3:1167).

[ back ] **105.** Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 3:1167. See also Benjamin 2012:462.

[ back ] **106.** Benjamin 2012:463.

[ back ] **107.** Benjamin 1995–2000, 4:56, letter of October 3, 1931: "Brechts überaus positive Stellung zu Kafka's Werk."

[ back ] **108.** See the analysis below, pp. 290–295.

[ back ] **109.** Kafka 1971:404 (originally published in *Ein Landarzt* in 1919).

[ back ] **110.** See Mosès 2006:71–101, "Brecht et Benjamin interprètent Kafka."

[ back ] **111.** In the Essay, Benjamin recognizes the messianism that is expressed in a final straightening out of our temporal experience (1999d:812–813).

[ back ] **112.** “Gespräche mit Brecht,” in Benjamin 1981:153–155.

[ back ] **113.** See Benjamin 1999d:813.

[ back ] **114.** A set of preparatory notes and excerpts for these pages of the Essay can be found in Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 3:1242–1245.

[ back ] **115.** See Benjamin’s own reflections (starting in September 1934), Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 3:1248–1256, and his preparatory notes for a revision, 1256–1264.

[ back ] **116.** See, for example, a letter to Carl Linfert from late December, 1934, indicating that both the published version of his essay and the larger manuscript were “fragmentary” (Benjamin 1995–2000, 4:557).

[ back ] **117.** He had reached a crossroads (see his letter to Scholem, September 15, 1934 [Benjamin 2012:454–456]). If he accepts the “‘absolute concreteness’ of the word of revelation,” in agreement with his partner (“a truth which definitely belongs to Kafka”—which is not the case), he must also gain access to the “perspective that for the first time makes the historical aspect of his failure obvious” (455).

[ back ] **118.** The first of the two letters written the same day, June 12, 1938 (Benjamin 2012:560–566), was drafted in such a way as to be shown to Schocken (at Scholem’s request); the content is announced at the outset: an analysis of Brod’s biography of Kafka, which had just been published, is completed by reflections of a more general nature; see Brod 1961

[ back ] **119.** Benjamin 1995–2000, 6:107.

[ back ] **120.** On Brod, see Scholem’s letter of November 6–8, 1938 (Benjamin and Adorno 1989:237). In the letter, Scholem summarizes other encounters that took place during his stay in New York (235–236). He did not deem it possible or appropriate to transmit Benjamin’s letter (236). Moreover, the divergences between the two friends remained unchanged (236–237).

[ back ] **121.** The roles played in the masquerade are not easy to disentangle. Did Scholem approve against his will, on any occasion alone?

[ back ] **122.** Scholem’s letter of November 6–8, 1938 (Benjamin and Adorno 1989:237).

[ back ] **123.** See Benjamin’s letter of June 12, 1938 (Benjamin 2012:564–566).

[ back ] **124.** Benjamin 2012:563–564. Was this passage intended for Schocken?

[ back ] **125.** Benjamin 2012:564; this is harsh and terrible.

[ back ] **126.** Benjamin 2012:565. The sentence is in parentheses; it does not explain a qualifying judgment, but supports a judgment that situates the work on the side of failure and negativity.

[ back ] **127.** “... in the case of Kafka, we can no longer speak of wisdom. Only the products of its decay remain. There are two: One is the rumor about the true things (a sort of theology passed along by whispers ... ); the other product of this diathesis is folly [*Torheit*] ... Folly lies at the heart of Kafka’s favorites—from Don Quixote, via the assistants, to animals” (Benjamin 2012:565).

[ back ] **128.** Letter of February 4, 1939 (Benjamin 2012:592–595); his proposition now would be to say: “Kafka as Laureate of the onerous obligation to seek out his Hardy—and that was Brod” (595).

[ back ] **129.** Benjamin 2012:595; the italics are the author’s. The theology is necessary, and so is the buffoonery that is inherent to Kafka and that mocks theology. The writer is addressing his friend Scholem; the irony is acerbic. Benjamin and Scholem have known about a passage in Kafka’s diaries that would have delighted him: “The great days of the court jesters are probably gone never to return ... I at least have thoroughly delighted in the institution, even if it should now be lost to mankind” (Kafka 1929:170, letter of July 29, 1917).

[ back ] **130.** Letter to Scholem, June 12, 1938: “He was obviously unwilling to bear responsibility to posterity for a work whose greatness he was well aware of” (Benjamin 2012:561). Another parenthesis—on the side of failure.

[ back ] **131.** Bouretz 2010:278 (and even earlier, 176–177)—again in relation to the demand that the work be destroyed

[ back ] **132.** He regularly came back to the Schocken affair in his correspondence with Scholem, which was much less frequent in this later period; see his letter of February 20, 1939 (Benjamin and Scholem 1989:244). (In a letter dated March 2, 1939)

Scholem assured him that he had done everything possible “within the bounds of advisable tactical considerations” [Benjamin and Scholem 1989:246]; see also Scholem’s letter of March 14, 1939 [Benjamin and Scholem 1989:248–249]. Benjamin that he was ready to accept any other project). More recently, Tackels (2009:543–548) has devoted several pages to a fierce critique of Brod’s sanctification of his idol and of the religious simplification of the mystery in the novels, without situating remarks in the context of the expectation of a decision on Schocken’s part. The attack on the enthroned rival is nevertheless inseparable from this expectation. He is right to evoke the displeasure aroused at the same time by the meeting and the alliance between Scholem and Adorno in New York; the sociologist must not have been informed about the Judaizing project that was intended to free Benjamin from a dependency that weighed on him—he was fully engrossed in his work on Baudelaire.

[ back ] **133.** Scholem 1981:217; we understand that it was a matter of real antipathy, even aversion. A void, precisely what Benjamin was building a way out for himself. Disappointment followed (218–220). Scholem played at being the protector; he could do this only by reducing his solidarity by half (211, 214–215). If he had approved of the attack on Brod, it was because this attack was part of the strategy that was supposed to convince Schocken.

[ back ] **134.** Letter to Scholem, January 11, 1940 (Benjamin 2012:624).

[ back ] **135.** Benjamin and Scholem 1989:236; the passage is interesting.

[ back ] **136.** Celan 2004:268–303, comprehensive catalogue of his reading notes.

[ back ] **137.** Date indicated at the end of the essay: December 11, 1959. The poet may have referred later on to this first reading.

[ back ] **138.** One could add “Ars Poetica 62,” *GW* 6:87; “Sprüchlein-Deutsch” (“A little saying- German”), *GW* 7:183; an important poem “Vom Anblick der Anselm” (“From beholding the blackbirds”), *GW* 2:94. On the theme of Kafka in Celan, see Liska’s 2006 study. [TN: several of the poems mentioned are available in English translation: “In Prague,” Celan 2005:103–104; “Frankfurt, September,” Celan 2005:110; “From beholding the blackbirds,” Celan 2014:95.]

[ back ] **139.** Benjamin 1997; Wiedemann 2003, with annotations by B. Badiou and B. Wiedemann; see also *GW* 7.

[ back ] **140.** See Bollack 2001:93–101, “Walter Benjamin en 1968.” Schöttker (2008) acknowledges that the poem “Port deutsch?” (“Port Bou—German?”) has to be read as a response to the 1930 review of Max Kommerell’s *Der Dichter als in der deutsche Klassik* (Berlin, 1928); he invokes Hannah Arendt, too, on this subject. But whatever he may say, the poem (or must) be read without this reference.

[ back ] **141.** Here is the form of the repetition in the speech: “‘Attention’—allow me to refer to Walter Benjamin’s essay on Kafka, in which something Malebranche said is cited—‘Attention is the natural prayer of the soul’” (*GW* 3:198).

[ back ] **142.** Benjamin 1999d:812.

[ back ] **143.** “It is the ground of folk tradition, German as well as Jewish” (Benjamin 1999d:812), just before the sentence which *The Meridian* refers to.

[ back ] **144.** “Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul.” See nos. 32/74 (p. 63) and 50 (p. 68) in Celan 1999. (In all, Celan finds six states of this unity.)

[ back ] **145.** Chalfen 1991:77.

[ back ] **146.** *GW* 1:284–286; cited from Celan 1988:219.

[ back ] **147.** This term is a transformation of “Kakanier,” based on “K.K.,” “königlich-kaiserlich.” Excerpts from the letter cited in Wiedemann 2003: “It all started for me in Lubenz and Aussig, on the banks of the Elba, where my mother had taken refuge during the war of 1914” (712).

[ back ] **148.** See Bollack 2005b.

[ back ] **149.** Celan 1995, no. 104:142–143.

[ back ] **150.** Celan 2001:381; for the complete German text, see *GW* 7:306–309.

[ back ] **151.** Celan 2014:357; for the German text, see “Mauerspruch,” *GW* 2:371.

[ back ] **152.** The face has lost its structure (it is “disfigured,” *entstellt*) and has simultaneously found support for its negation. J.-P. Lefebvre translates *Mauerspruch* as “Dazibao” (Celan 2007:52). [TN: “Dazibao” is a Chinese word referring to an inscription on a wall; cf. “What the Wall Says,” Celan 2006:7.] Must one not preserve the wall? It is a counter-word, com-

afar; the mortuary experience in a sense contains and surpasses everything that one has been able to read on the walls

[ back ] **153.** Benjamin 1999d:433–457. It is essential to have opened the book and observed what is found on the facing page. The first stanza cannot be understood without being juxtaposed to the last sentence of the essay on Karl Kraus, which precedes the Kafka piece: “Like a creature springs from the child and the cannibal, his conqueror stands before him: not a new man—a monster, a new angel” (Benjamin 1999d:457). What follows is underlined: “Perhaps one of those who, according to the Talmud, are at each moment created anew in countless throngs, and who, once they have raised their voices before God, cease and pass into nothingness. Lamenting, chastising, or rejoicing? No matter—on this evanescent voice the ephemeral work of Kraus is modeled. Angelus—that is the messenger in the old engravings” (Benjamin 1999d; cf. Celan 2004:294, no. 349).

[ back ] **154.** See Wurm’s letter, no. 106 (Celan 1995:145) where he mentions the lion with two tails.

[ back ] **155.** Lefebvre is surely right not to relate the weapon to the measures of governmental repression (or even to a missile), but to the militant power, rising toward the stars, of poetry put to the test (Celan 2007:130).

[ back ] **156.** As for the syntax, it seems to me that it would be best not to see in “the weapon” an apposition to “face,” but to make it a second proposition, which is extended in the result of the action (beyond the colon).

[ back ] **157.** Celan 1999:9, section 35d.

[ back ] **158.** “24 rue Tournefort,” *GN*:203; cited from Celan 2014:601.

[ back ] **159.** See “Gezinkt der Zufall” (*GW* 2:115; in English as “Chance, marked,” in Celan 2014:113). [TN: *gezinkt* translates more literally as “toothed” or “pronged.”]

[ back ] **160.** Arnau Pons wonders whether Celan is also referring to the twentieth-century Jewish thinker, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel; he used to say that every person is a “shiviti.”

[ back ] **161.** See Celan 1997:490, and the excerpts included with the posthumous poems, 490–491.

[ back ] **162.** *GW* 2:389; cited from Celan 2014:373.

[ back ] **163.** Benjamin 1999d:808.

[ back ] **164.** A first study of this poem appeared in German (Bollack 2005a); see esp. 1186–1194, where Celan’s reading of Benjamin’s essay on Kafka is much in evidence. [TN: The French text is not included in Bollack 2005b:262.]

[ back ] **165.** The poem stimulated a reflection on poetry and its historicity in a documented study by W. Hamacher (2007). A discussion of the options is difficult in the context of this study. I have chosen to limit myself to the position Celan took in relation to history and a literary past. Hamacher proposes to open himself to the text in its virtualities. He deciphers a path for the future for history, which constitutes for him the true content of the poem: the latter, as such, “detaches itself from itself” (language speaks in its lack and its absence, not the poet who writes). From this perspective, it is important for the interpreter to recognize “the unfinished, that which is open and possible” (this is the orientation defined from the beginning of the poem, p. 173). Benjamin’s “prehistoric world” will be past history (the war, 1968, and so on) from which the text separates itself, no longer situating itself in relation to that history; it projects a future that may not come about. The author of the study reads the lines one by one, pushing a possible fixation onto a higher “open” fabulation, which one can no longer rigorously separate from an expressive intent. The term will be the blank space on the page, the stopping of a language that would delimit itself by pulling back. Thus the central term “hemo” will be in itself a polyvalent complex made up of possible words (“and in addition a word in which each word is broken”). In multiplying, meaning de-values all the information that is gathered

[ back ] **166.** See “Aus der Vergängnis” (*GW* 2:387), line 4. A whole lexical field (revealed in the Index) is implied, concerned with the general work of re-semanticization around a word.

[ back ] **167.** [TN: Joris has “emancipates” (Celan 2005:371).]

[ back ] **168.** Isn’t the translation by *majeure* (“major”) in *Partie de neige* (*Snowpart*)—the German-French bilingual edition translated and annotated by J.-P. Lefebvre (Celan 2007:73)—contradicted by the note to line 5, p. 142? For “mündigt” in “Aus der Vergängnis” (“Out of future-past fate”), Lefebvre retains “y munit de parole l’antan” (p. 70), then comments with “*émancipe*, closer to *majeure*.” One ought to choose advisedly. [TN: Joris has “come of age.”]

[ back ] **169.** Benjamin 1999d:806; and Wiedemann’s commentary in Celan 2003; Celan 2004:296, n379. Adorno drew a portrait of Morgenstern, whom he knew in Vienna, in the group around Alban Berg. He thought that he could be Kracauer’s disciple: “he is nice, subtle, intelligent ... ; he is thirty-two years old; his mother tongue is Polish, or else Yiddish; everything that relates to the forms proper to the West is problematic for him; the literary manners that are now its danger are due

search for a formation that has not been given him and that his little Talmudic head meets at an angle. Experiential data no means lacking to him, it is his reality in the human realm (a barbaric reality, and yet belonging to a tender, fragile being is his best feature" (Adorno and Kracauer 2008:87–88).

[ back ] 170. See above, pp. 290–291.

[ back ] 171. Benjamin 1999d:806.

[ back ] 172. "Jetzt wächst dein Gewicht," Celan 2003:516.

[ back ] 173. Benjamin 1999d:795; Celan 2004:294; the word *Dampfhammer* ("steam hammer") is underlined by Celan.

[ back ] 174. Published in *Ein Landarzt*, 1919; see Kafka 1988:401–402.

[ back ] 175. Benjamin 1999d:000.

[ back ] 176. *GW* 1:213; in English as "Over Wine and Lostness," Celan 1988:155.

[ back ] 177. *GW* 2:314; in English as "Roadblockbuoy," Joris 2014 :303. See Wögerbauer 2010:285–292, "Une Iliade sur pavé."

[ back ] 178. "Bestechlichkeit," *GN*:228 and 492.

[ back ] 179. Benjamin 1999d:796. ("An ihnen [Gerichtskanzleien] ist eine grenzenlose Korruptierbarkeit nicht das Schlechteste. Denn ihr Kern ist von solcher Beschaffenheit, daß ihre Bestechlichkeit die einzige Hoffnung ist, die die Menschlichkeit in ihrem Angesicht hegen kann" [Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 2:412]; see also Celan 2004:294, including the full sentence).

[ back ] 180. Benjamin 1999d:797 ("Gesetze und umschriebene Normen bleiben in der Vorwelt ungeschriebene Gesetze" [Benjamin 1978, 2, pt. 2:412], a passage heavily marked by the reader).

[ back ] 181. Celan 2001:397–400 ("*Gespräch im Gebirg*" [1959], *GW* 3:169–173).

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