

Knowledge and temptation: an account of Benjamin's approach to language

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Abstract Benjamin's notions of *naming* and *overnaming* lean on his reading of the Biblical relation of the *Fall*. This reading has often been labelled as Talmudic, even by Benjamin himself, attending his undeniable interest in his own religious and Scriptural tradition, but also due to the influence Gershom Scholem wielded on Benjamin's thought and writing, in spite of his more Marxist-biased peers. Moreover, in *On language as such*, Benjamin quotes Hamann and Kierkegaard not only as Biblical commentators but as language theorists which, at least when it comes to Kierkegaard, seems to be an unexpected turn. The weight of the impact of these two authors on Benjamin's work is still to be pondered. Kierkegaard's religious views themselves contain traces of Hamann's pietism – *Fear and Trembling* starts quoting Hamann-, and Benjamin's approach of the Kantian project –as stated in his *Program of the Coming Philosophy-* is *Hamannian* itself: [the] «great transformation and correction which must be performed upon the concept of experience, oriented so one-sidedly along mathematical-mechanical lines, can be attained *only by relating knowledge to language, as was attempted by Hamann during Kant's lifetime*», Benjamin affirms. I will then approach Benjamin's account of language in a Kierkegaardian-Hamannian framing, in order to bring together *language* and *history* as a single theological category that defines the borders of Benjamin's notion of knowledge both as *temptation* and *Revelation*.

Keywords: language, Revelation, *Sittlichkeit*, knowledge, idolatry

To Sandra Pinar
and Richard Bernstein,
Herzlichen Dank

*'Language, the mother of reason and revelation, its
Alpha and Omega', says Hamann
Walter Benjamin, On language as such*

*Our knowledge is piecemeal
Johann Georg Hamann*

For Kierkegaard, knowledge is temptation. For Benjamin knowledge is, in a way, idolatry. That is, their account of knowledge is nearly the same. Such intemperate statements, which seem to be equally valid for Kierkegaard's several *noms de*

*plume*¹, acquire meaning when faith is understood as *not knowledge*. One of the footnotes Johannes Climacus dedicates to Socrates on the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* seems to suggest that knowledge that can be forced out of faith is to be considered nothing but *prattle*: “Socrates had understood – Kierkegaard says through his scrivener Climacus – his God-relationship in a way that he dared say nothing at all, from fear of indulging in foolish *prattle* [...] he does not even speak to God inwardly – and yet he is doing the highest thing of all” (KIERKEGAARD 2009: 76, footnote *h*). Benjamin, in his early essay on Socrates, written in 1916, wrote: “Socrates understands the spiritual only as *knowledge* and *virtue*” (BENJAMIN 2011a: 234). But even if the Socratic account of *virtue* is somehow clear, we cannot say the same about *knowledge*: translating Socrates’s relationship with God into speech is, in a way, *heretic* – Benjamin says that it would be an attempt to pursue the *eidos* and make it objective, “through hatred and desire” (*Ibid.*) – and leads inevitably to what Benjamin understood as *mourning*: the “deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate” (BENJAMIN 2011b: 73). Being unable to translate the totality of an absolute relationship – as Kierkegaard glimpses in Socrates’ muteness-, language has to *choose* (αἰπέω) a determinate speech: it can talk *either* about this *or* about that, and that is all. As in Benjamin’s *On Language as such*, this speech is only judgment, and judgment has nothing but “direct knowledge of good and evil” (*Ibid.*: 71): virtue and not-virtue, in the Socratic case. The critique Benjamin addresses to this kind of *knowledge* corresponds to what he sketches as the *experience of adults* in his 1913 essay *Experience*: “the mask of the adult is called ‘experience’. It is expressionless, impenetrable, ever the same” (BENJAMIN 2011c: 116). This account of knowledge is parodied in his early *Epilogue*: “what has the school given us? First of all: knowledge, knowledge, knowledge” (BENJAMIN 2011d: 53). The knowledge judgment presupposes is *adult prattle*: it knows *nothing* because it has already *experienced everything*: “youth, ideals, hopes, women”, but considers “it was all illusion” (BENJAMIN 2011c: 116). What adult prattle ignores, in his already saturated experience, is that “the kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us” (BENJAMIN 2006, III: 47).

The approximation between religious and linguistic categories – *prattle*, *speech* and *non-speech*, so far – is not as unusual as it may appear at first sight, and has been suggested by Kierkegaard’s own pseudonyms long before Benjamin’s essays: *Climacus* – originally, the abbot of Raithu Monastery, on the shores of the Red Sea, author of the ascetical treatise known as *The ladder of divine ascent* – somehow embodies – as suggested by the very etymology of his name, *climax*, *ladder* – the elevation of reason towards God – *via iluminativa* –, just as *De Silentio* resembles

¹ Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms, it appears to me, are versions of Hamann’s *Aristobolus*, *the Knight of the Rose-Cross*, *the Sibyl*, and *Adelgunde*. Benjamin also published under the pseudonyms of *Ardor*, *Detlef Holz* and *Agesilaus Santander*. Gershom Scholem’s work, *The secret names of Walter Benjamin*, thoroughly devotes itself to this last name, linking it to Benjamin’s use of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*. Nevertheless, I must admit I have not (yet) committed myself to the task of minutely verifying if this account of language as temptation in all of Kierkegaard’s and Benjamin’s *noms de plume*.

not only Socrates' apophatic wisdom but also *The Cloud of Unknowing* – *via negativa* –, and the *anti-Climacus* suggests introspective recollection by *retiring the ladder*. However, knowledge as speech – that is, the very ability to discourse – is the only way in which knowledge can be historically attained, since knowledge “as an absolute relation” with *names* – being the act of *naming* the grounding dimension of language, both historically and metaphysically – “exists only in God [...] This means that God made things knowable in their *names* [but] man, however, *names them according to knowledge*” (BENJAMIN 2011b: 68). If the approximation between religious and linguistic categories seems somehow easy to grasp – particularly in the aphorisms attributed to the Fathers of the Desert, or in the long treatises of Rhineland and Spanish baroque mysticism, to name a few –, the triad including historic categories as well is not strange to western tradition either since, as read in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (cfr. AGAMBEN 1999: 49), “history pertains to grammar” – *haec disciplina [scil. Historia] ad grammaticam pertinent* – : every historical transmission of any content necessarily belongs to the domain of *letters*. The difference between *gramma* and St. John The Evangelist's understanding of *logos* – “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” [Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος καὶ ἰ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν] – is not a caprice, and it suggests not a negation of knowledge, but rather an appeal to a different kind of knowledge in which man participates not dialectically or, at least, in a qualitatively different dialectic dynamic² since, as Benjamin explains, “the paradisiacal language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge” (BENJAMIN 2011b: 71): it was constituted only by names, because “the language of Paradise was fully cognizant” (*Ibid.*), and the judging word “expels the first human beings from Paradise” (*Ibid.*), that is, from the God-Relationship Kierkegaard saw in Socrates' muteness. The fact that Isidore of Sevilla himself approached the Greek alphabet in a mystic manner – just like Kabbalah does – is not a caprice either³.

This *perfect knowledge* Benjamin refers to is not to be confused with Revelation. Actually, Revelation is not knowledge either. That is probably the reason why succumbing into temptation was so easy for Adam and Eve: Revelation and temptation look alike. Here lies also the temptation of thinking that *angels* – as messengers who *reveal* God's sacred purposes – *deliver no messages at all* but perform actions, such as stopping Abraham's hand – as in the Biblical tale of the binding of Isaac –, or merely wish they could perform them, just as Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* “would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been

² This difference between *gramma* and *logos* is precisely what Derrida addresses, thoroughly, in his *On Grammatology*.

³ “Five are the mystic Greek letters: the first one, Γ, represents human life [...]; the second, Θ, designates death, because judges engrave this letter on those who they condemn. It is called theta, *apo tou thanatou*, which means death, and that is why it has a trace, in the middle of it, meaning death. That is the reason why someone said “Theta is an unfortunate letter amongst others”. The third, Τ, represents the figure of the Lord's Cross and as such is understood in Hebrew, and that is why it is said, in the Book of Ezekiel, to the angel: “go through Jerusalem and write a Tau on the foreheads of those who weep and sigh”. The remnant two Christ said to be the beginning and the end, saying “I am the Α and the Ω”.

smashed” (BENJAMIN 2006, IX). Revelation is then a fact, either historical or pre/para/meta-historical.

If Revelation were to be the transmission of a specific content – any content, from *God exists* to *green monkeys sing underwater*, a message an angel could deliver – then language – either as judgment, as *naming* or *overnaming* or as the ability to discourse – might grasp it on its own effort. Abraham could have found out that God didn’t want him to kill his own son. The fact that the word *Revelation* is familiar even to contemporary listeners – who have *gone further*, as Kierkegaard would complain – does not necessarily mean that there might be, attached to this ability, an actual capacity to define the meaning of the word. When Christian theologians affirm that Revelation is nothing different than the person of Christ – as the divine Word incarnate, as explicitly written in John’s Gospel – or Jewish theologians point out that God’s Revelation is nothing but His Name – which remains hidden even after being revealed, since it has no meaning, “but which in the first instance enables meaning to be given” (SCHOLEM 2006: 69) – what is supposed to be shown is the fact that Revelation is not a specific linguistic event neither a way of *meta-language*. In its hiding, Revelation seduces, since “nothing, after all, is so pervaded by seduction and damnation as a secret” (KIERKEGAARD 2004: 254). But was not Revelation supposed to *reveal* something? Yes, but it is also true that “those whom God blesses he damns in the same breath” (KIERKEGAARD 2003: 94).

What *Revelation* must *reveal*, then, is not something that could not be known *unless revealed*, but something that puts into question, as Agamben (1999) explains, the very possibility of knowledge as such. If Kierkegaard is right stating that faith is not knowledge, then the truth that faith points at also concerns language *itself*: the fact that language as such exists and that, even though human beings know the world *in* language, they cannot know language *itself*. “Stepping outside of the purer language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him) and therefore also [...] a *mere* sign” (BENJAMIN 2011b: 72), Benjamin writes. This approaches *faith* to the kind of knowledge involved in *naming* but, since man has stepped out of the *name-language*, how can he be faithful or, moreover, how can he even *know*? Epistemology is, then, a theological-historical-linguistic matter.

Language *itself* –the language of *names*, but specifically the *Name of God* as the source and guarantor of all meaning-, since a-historical –*para*-historical, *meta*-historical- was known only by Adam before he named Creation; not by, for instance, Kierkegaard’s Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* who instead must remain silent, “speak with tongues⁴” (KIERKEGAARD 2003: 138), or name the world after his own fallen, *historical*, experience: “Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place ‘The Lord Will Provide’” (*Gen. 22, 13-14*). The Biblical tale of the Binding of Isaac explicitly says that Abraham *named* the Mountain after his historical experience of it. He *named*

⁴ Kierkegaard obviously alludes to Pentecost, as the overcoming of the Babelic confusion.

Moriah *according to knowledge* (BENJAMIN 2011b: 68). Abraham confuses *representation* with *knowledge* and his own *adult experience* with *truth*. As James Martel points out, “we have no choice but to engage with representation [but] representation works best when it visibly fails to achieve its purpose” (MARTEL 2012: 3-11) or, at least, when we are aware of representation as such.

When representation pretends to offer us a true vision of a given community, it is inherently idolatrous. Benjamin [...] is the thinker who is most interested in how to combat the effects of *political idolatry*, of occult theological principles that are misrecognized even as they organize the basis of our political life [...] A fetishist for him is someone who believes that the truth is accessible, even though it is not. In this sense, underlying the notion of fetishism is the notion of truth itself; the ‘truth’ becomes an ultimate fetish (mis)guiding all of our myriad expectations and practices [...] only the anti-fetishist knows that they have no hope to truly capture a truth (*Ibid.*).

On the matter, in his *De Ordine*, Augustine indicates that “anything memorable consigned to letters necessarily pertains to grammar” (AUGUSTINE, *De Ordine*, 2, 12, 37). The letter – that is, the *gramma* – is then, first of all, a historical element, historically built, historically inherited. It is a *representation*. Following the Stoic theory of language – which, according to Agamben, Augustine adopts as his own (cfr. AGAMBEN 1999) –, Augustine recognizes two levels in language: that of pure nomination – *impositio* – and that of discourse, which derives from the first “as a river from its source” (Varro, *De lingua latina*, VIII, 5-6). The resemblance with Benjamin’s account of *naming* and *overnaming* in *On language as such* is, to say the least, clear enough:

Things have no proper names except in God. For in his creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names. In the language of men, however, they are overnamed. There is, in the relation of human languages to that of things, something that can be approximately described as “overnaming”-the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) for all deliberate muteness. Overnaming as the linguistic being of melancholy points to another curious relation of language: the overprecision that obtains in the tragic relationship between the languages of human speakers⁵. (BENJAMIN 2011b: 73).

This means –for Benjamin as for Hamann, Augustine and Varro- that since human beings can only receive names through historical transmission –“in *descending*”, affirms Varro- their access to the fundamental dimension of language –*naming*- is mediated by history. Moreover, “this infinite descent of names *is history*” (AGAMBEN 1999: 50). In human word, historically mediated as it is, then, the name “no longer lives intact [since language has] stepped out of name-language [...] The word must communicate something (other than itself). In that fact lies the true Fall [...] The knowledge of things resides in the name, whereas that of good and evil is, in the profound sense *in which Kierkegaard uses the word, prattle*, and knows

⁵ The remains of Augustine’s theory of language in Benjamin’s work should be traced back into Hamann’s writings. As a pietist, Hamann’s theology is deeply influenced by Luther’s doctrines which are, in turn, Augustinian.

only purification and elevation” (BENJAMIN 2011b: 71). The externally communicating word is then –according to Benjamin’s reading of Kierkegaard, which I claim to be one of the non explicit groundings for *On language as such*⁶- the word that, “after the promise of the snake, knows good and evil” (BENJAMIN 2011b: 71), that is, the word which knowledge is none other than that of the universal. It knows only *Sittlichkeit*, and it is no longer *the Word that was with God, and that was God*. However, according to Spinoza’s definition of desire (Spinoza, *Ethics*, III: 11s; III: 39s.), Adam already knew good and evil the very moment he took God’s word to be a prohibition: “Adam is ignorant of causes”, Spinoza says, and so the first man confuses “good” as a mode of existence (immediate knowledge) with “good” as a value opposed to Evil (mediated knowledge, *adult* experience). This knowledge of good and evil is, precisely, *the relief of speech*: it “translates me into the universal” (KIERKEGAARD 2003: 137). Mourning seems to be, then, the most accurate way of uttering language *itself*. Here lies a paradox – or “an abyss into which all linguistic theory threatens to fall, and to survive suspended precisely over this abyss is its task” (BENJAMIN 2011b: 63) – that relates mourning and celebration.

The temptation of speech is, as sketched, the temptation of knowledge. Should then faith, which we have already sketched as *not knowledge*, be understood as *silence*, as opposed to *prattle* or *speech*? Apparently not, since Kierkegaard swiftly points out that silence, even though is “divinity’s communion with the individual” (KIERKEGAARD 2003: 115) is also – paradoxically – “the demon’s lure, and the more silent one keeps the more terrible the demon becomes” (*Ibid.*). Even more: “in the temporal world – that is, precisely, in *history* – God and I cannot talk together, *we have no common language*” (*Ivi*: 74). Any notion of a language common to God and mankind must begin with the acknowledgement of the potentiality of language – that is, as the possibility of enunciation as such – as language itself:

Hamann says, ‘Everything that man heard in the beginning, saw with his eyes, and felt with his hands was the living word; for God was the word. With this word in his mouth and in his heart, the origin of language was as natural, as close, and as easy as a child’s game’ (BENJAMIN 2011b: 70).

Adam’s tongue could name the world in absolute freedom as an act of, at the same time, absolute responsibility. This *responsibility* is indistinguishable from absolute freedom, since “the law is not made for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels” (1 *Timothy*, 1:9) and should be understood not only as a non-historically mediated

⁶ It seems to me that Kierkegaard’s writings work on Walter Benjamin’s account of language as the hunchback who is an expert chess player in the automaton on the first of the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: “The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called ‘historical materialism’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight”.

access to *nominatio* – since history starts with Adam himself, if we are to understand history as that infinite descent of names – but also as a universal opening ceremony – even though the *world* is not being created, it is being *completed* when *named*- and, as such, remains within the index of history as a possible quotation – as a possibility for *messianic* irruption in *Jetztzeit*, as a possibility for *memory*, for *redemption* and even for *justice*, since here lies the idea not only of Benjamin’s *Divine Violence* but also of Kierkegaard’s relation to eternal happiness-. It is probably Walter Benjamin – following not only Gershom Scholem, but also the Jewish Talmudic tradition itself- who better explains this. In his *On Language as Such and the Language of Men*, he clearly states – in spite of those who argue that ‘the importance of language has been exaggerated’ – :

There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents. This use of the word ‘language’ is in no way metaphorical. For to think that we cannot imagine anything that does not communicate its mental nature in its expression is entirely meaningful; consciousness is apparently (or really) bound to such communication to varying degrees, but this cannot alter the fact that we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything. An existence entirely without relationship to language is an idea; but this idea can bear no fruit even within that realm of Ideas whose circumference defines the idea of God⁷ (BENJAMIN 2011b: 62).

In contrast with this Word-In-Eden, historically mediated language is the realm of both the Kierkegaardian aesthetic and ethical (as Benjamin says, of *judgment*) but that doesn’t seem to be the case when it comes to the religious. After the Fall, no event in nature cannot but partake of language in history. Using Benjamin’s taxonomies, *language as such* is only accessible through *language of men*. Trying to bridge the gap, a dimension of liturgy quotes history in a Messianic disruption of time. Not only Abraham’s story is liturgically evoked – and, in a way, *celebrated* – when, in Rosh HaShanah – “when the world trembles in Judgment before God” – the Shofar is blown: Rosh HaShanah is also considered to be Adam HaRishon’s birthday, since history (and therefore the calendar) only exists in relation to a self-aware-*self* provided with discourse. This horn is precisely the reminiscent of the ram which replaced Isaac as an offering, and its blowing is understood by all of those born within the chosen people as saying “Master of the Universe! Just as Abraham our father suppressed his compassion for his only son to do Your will with a whole heart, so may Your compassion suppress Your wrath against us” –. In a like manner, the legend says, *Sonntagskinder* (children born on Sunday) understand *the songs of birds in the woods*. However, even when the blowing of the Shofar gives a proper account of history understood not as *transmission of contents* but as the messianic breakthrough of *Jetztzeit*, we must resist the temptation of thinking that liturgy or legends are able to bridge the gap between the ‘pure life of feeling’ [*reines*

⁷ Even though Benjamin seldom quotes Spinoza – as far as I am aware – it seems somehow obvious that the way in which he uses the words *relationship*, *idea* and *God* in this passage is entirely Spinozist. An idea, for Spinoza, is “a mode of thinking, primary in relation to the other modes of thinking, *while being different from them*”: the name of God is related to all speech, but is anyhow entirely different from it. (Cfr. Spinoza, *Ethics*, II, ax. 3).

Gefühlsleben] and meaning [*Bedeutung*]. Kierkegaard and Benjamin dare writing, escaping the demon's lure but, at the same time in doing so they are turning their backs to communion with the divine: language knows no integral actuality, "for now we see only a reflection as in a mirror [...] now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 *Corinthians*, 13:12). As Walter Benjamin explains it, in one of his preparatory notes for his *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*,

The messianic world is the world of total and integral actuality. In it alone is there universal history. What goes by the name of universal history today can only be a kind of Esperanto. Nothing can correspond to it as long as the confusion originated in the Tower of Babel is not smoothed out. It presupposes the language into which every text of a living or dead language must be wholly translated. Or rather, it itself is this language. Not, though, as written, but as festively celebrated. This celebration is purified of every ceremony. It knows no celebratory songs. Its language is the idea of prose itself, which is understood by all humans just as the language of birds is understood by those born on Sunday (*Sonntagskinder*)⁸. (BENJAMIN 2000: 48).

Revelation understood as not-knowledge acquires clearer meaning when framed within the apparently more common notion of *faith*, which Hamann embraces. Rather than the absolutely disciplined army – or any other form of supreme authority equivalent to the Enlightened Regent, may it be the State, the Law or the Chieftain – that Kant sees himself forced to posit as the guarantor of a convenient use of public reason – and consequently as the eventual possibility of *perpetual peace*⁹ – Hamann appeals to the Psalter, claiming *Initium Sapientiae Timor Domini* (Ps. 111, 10). This 'fear of God' is, to Hamann, that which enables reason to see but, in his own field, is no longer visible, precisely as Hume's *faith* (and it is no coincidence that it was Hamann who translated Hume's work into German). For Walter Benjamin this *faith* acquires an eminently linguistic character – inherited from *Sturm und Drang*'s notion of experience – which he will attempt to develop as a Neo-Kantian thesis aiming to widen the Aufklärung-Kantian notion of experience by rifting it apart from what he claims to be a form of *mythology*: the not enough problematized affiliation of the Kantian project to Newtonian physics, which acritically becomes a non-explicit *petitio principii*. That "which enables reason to see" and at the same time remains invisible is the pure possibility of saying, contained in the potentiality of language, not in the Newtonian framework. Within a secular Aufklärung-consequent framing this *idea of God* is to be understood as the pure potentiality of language, as the fact that *there is such a thing as language* not as transmission of any particular meaning

⁸ However, some other versions of the legend of *Sonntagskinder* say something different.

⁹ Kant's *Second definitive article for perpetual peace* reads as follows: "Peoples, as states, like individuals, may be judged to injure one another merely by their coexistence in the state of nature (i.e., while independent of external laws). Each of them, may and should for the sake of its own security demand that the others enter with it into a constitution similar to the civil constitution, for under such a constitution each can be secure in his right. This would be a league of nations, but it would not have to be a state consisting of nations. That would be contradictory, since a state implies the relation of a superior (legislating) to an inferior (obeying), i.e., the people". Thinking individuals in their state of nature are doomed to necessarily harm each other is, to say the least, a Hobbesian inheritance that constitutes, paraphrasing Benjamin, a *mythological hypothesis*.

but as the very possibility of it. Because of its own nature, *language* can only show itself: this is what we are to understand as Revelation.

When Isaiah Berlin – on his *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* – identified Hamann as one of the first writers who understood human reason as language, he was echoing claims long ago made by Goethe, Kierkegaard and Lessing. Both Kierkegaard and Goethe did not hesitate to say that it was Hamann – instead of Kant – the brightest mind of the XVIII century. Being a personal friend to Kant he also wrote the first critique on the Critique – published in 1781, just as Kant’s book –, pointing out that the aesthetic and political fallibility of the Enlightenment’s rationalist and universalist pretensions lied on a poor notion of human experience, constrained within a notion of Nature reduced to extension, due to a thoughtless assumption of both Cartesian and Wolffian intellectual influences. Kant himself would have been a victim of inherited, *valued, dear mistakes*, according to Hamann. In short, the cornerstone of Hamann’s critique on the whole Kantian project is the remark that even *a priori* analytic propositions – including geometrical abstract objects – are linguistic inscriptions. When, on his *Metacritique of the Purism of Reason*, Hamann wrote that “the faculty of thought is possible before, with, without or beyond experience only throughout the genealogic priority of language before the Table of Categories, and therefore only throughout language as the pure *a priori* form, and the true aesthetic element of all human Reason and knowledge”, he was leaving the door open not only for substituting the Kantian transcendental subject for *Stück Natur*, but also for the possibility of silence as pure potentiality of speech, just as God’s Name, and not as mere lack of discourse.

It was Adorno who affirmed that Benjamin intended to “understand the essence [...] methodologically guessing it through the configuration of elements that remain far from their meaning¹⁰” (ADORNO 2001: 12), referring to his treatment of any lay text as if it were a sacred one, and to his approach of ruins as treasures. In fact, Benjamin approached not only any text in this fashion, but also any other kind of *commodity*. This is Benjamin’s authentically revolutionary gesture: the commodities rejected by Marx – “a commodity is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” – are now the cornerstones. The imaginal polyvalence of allegories builds incomplete, ephemeral and purposely ambiguous *niceties*, i.e., representations¹¹. It is in this polyvalence where, in *Jetztzeit*, the *Selbst* – as an allegory of a possible identity – shows itself as a constellation: a relation between what is *being* –and, since it is *being*, it is not yet to be considered a *whole*: *wholeness* comes with death- and what has not yet been, but is already being. As in the messianic understanding of history, Redemption is to be understood as *already-and-not-yet*: although *The Age to Come* – which includes death – is in the future, it can still be “tasted” now – the *Selbst* is well aware of his mortal condition, although will always

¹⁰ The translation of the Spanish version into English is mine.

¹¹ This seems to me a proper way to understand the need not only for Kierkegaardian *repetition* but for the different narrations De Silentio presents on Abraham’s journey to Mount Moriah, and even Kierkegaard’s, Hamann’s and Benjamin’s own leaning on pseudonymia.

try to push this conscience away from itself –. The fight [*polemos*, but also *agon*] against this taste is, Kierkegaard claims, both despair and desire at the same time, and Benjamin's *mourning* and *melancholy* lie precisely in this foretaste. Under this light, we can understand why "temptation then becomes an expression of the limit" (KIERKEGAARD 2009: 385): the limit between *already* and *not yet*. But if silence and discourse are both temptations – since knowledge is *prattle* and silence is 'the demon's lure' – how can one be responsible? How can one be *religious*, if "religion supposes the access to the responsibility of a free self (DERRIDA 2007: 13) and the relationship religion implies is itself "a trial, a *temptation*" (KIERKEGAARD 2003: 88)? Even though it is *impossible* – and that is precisely what makes it properly religious –, this impossibility is somehow nuanced by the impossibility of responsibility itself:

Saying that a responsible decision must be made according to some knowledge seems to define, at the same time, the conditions of possibility of responsibility itself (it is impossible to make a decision without science and conscience, without knowing what is to be done, why, on what account, and in which conditions is the decision being made) and the conditions of impossibility of the very same responsibility (if a decision follows such knowledge and is content just developing, unfolding it, it is no longer a responsible decision, but the simple mechanical development of a theorem). (DERRIDA 2007: 36)

This paradoxical nature of responsibility is to be solved in Adamic language, that in which nothing is communicated, but in which language communicates itself naming the world: "in the *name*, the spiritual essence that is being communicated is language" (KIERKEGAARD 2009: 446). This *responsible freedom* is Adam's dwelling in Eden. Adamic freedom implies, for the exegetes, not only the triumph of life – since each and every aspect of human life were exalted and sanctified in the dawn of human history (pre-history, para-history, meta-history) that Adam's dwelling in Eden supposes, and that the revolutionary idea of a classless society naively tries to politically re-attain – but also the possibility of free intimacy of Adam with God in contemplation and action. Most Fathers of the Church commonly referred to this intimate freedom using the Greek word *parrhesía*, that might be translated as *freedom of speech*, and that has been traditionally understood as the right and duty of a *polités* to completely release its opinion in the civil assemblies that direct the action of the State. In the Genesis' tale, Adam's *freedom of speech* is not appreciated but by inference: the narration only allows the reader a glimpse of what substituted Adam's *parrhesía* after the Fall:

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are

you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid’ (*Genesis* 3, 8-11)¹².

Nonetheless, the *fortunate ruin* of Adam – as explained by Ambrose in his *De Paradiso* – is that his sin brought more good to mankind than if he had remained perfectly innocent in Eden. The Adamic sin of disobedience is to be understood as *total guilt*: it is, in itself, *the Fall*. The way in which this guilt is atoned is only one, and admits no substitutes. In fact, every substitute for existential pathos in relation to eternal happiness is but idolatry, and one takes the risk of ending up worshipping either a golden calf – as an external representation of what has *already come to being*, as in politics- or the self – as an internal representation of what is *being but not yet*, as in psychoanalysis-. Trying to overcome this paradoxical transformation dialectically is yielding to temptation, since “a dialectic that mediates is a guardian angel that has failed” (BUCK-MORRS 1979: 214), and one takes the risk of becoming a pillar of salt: “if one makes a single concession to speculation – says Climacus – about starting with pure being, then everything is lost and the confusion impossible to put a halt to, since it has to be stopped within pure being” (*Ivi*: 508). And if salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? (*Matthew* 5:13). *Catching a glimpse*, as Lot’s wife did, “is lack of faith and a betrayal of the task” (BUCK-MORRS 1979: 477), since “the martyrdom of faith (to crucify one’s understanding) is not a moment’s martyrdom but precisely the martyrdom of persistence” (*Ibid.*). This martyrdom, as a paradox, corresponds to Benjamin’s linguistic theory pillar: “the distinction between a mental entity and the linguistic entity in which it communicates [...] this paradox has a place, as a solution, at the centre of linguistic theory, but remains a paradox, and insoluble, if placed at the beginning”.

Judgment Day, therefore, is the disclosure of the Absolute as Absolute itself: Judgment Day is the ultimate *Relation Day*, in which language is understood with no need of content whatsoever: it is the day in which we are all *Sonntagskinder* or not. Any other forms of judgment – tragic *nemesis*, civil judgment – are lower atonements and remain within the sphere either of the aesthetic or the universal. That is the reason why Benjamin says that “the knowledge to which the snake seduces, that of good and evil (i.e. the *Universal*, as Kierkegaard names *Sittlichkeit*) is nameless. It is vain in the deepest sense, and this very knowledge is itself the only evil known to the paradisiacal state” (BENJAMIN 2011b: 71). If it is true that talkativeness – *prattle*, as Benjamin would say, following Kierkegaard – turns even the greatest effort into a trifle, then one can understand why Abraham remained silent on his way to Moriah, or why Socrates might be properly called “the destroyer of communication” (KIERKEGAARD 2009: 412). However, Socrates was not alone in

¹² Benjamin’s penchant for the genesic tale, amongst all reasons, is due to the fact that Adamic happiness in Eden includes *sinnliche Glück*, that *sensual happiness* that already in the late 1930’s permeated most of the Frankfurt School work. Even the image of God “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” suggest that the subject of the religious-philosophical experience –the one who relates itself to God- is none other than the human being and not a transcendental subject: “it is not a pure understanding, but a human body which feels, a ‘piece of nature’ (*Stück Natur*)” (Cfr. BUCK-MORRS 1979: 214).

this mission, since Hamann also proposed the need to differentiate between what can or cannot be understood – and therefore communicated – two thousand years later, redirecting Kant’s effort. Hamann’s quote De Silentio included as an epigraph at the very beginning of *Fear and Trembling* clearly states such distinction: “what Tarquin the Proud said in his garden with the poppy blooms was understood by the son but not by the messenger”.

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