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Pain and Memory in Benjamin's Mourning Play¹

One of the cruxes of Walter Benjamin's work is the tension between an indebted and an expiating »memoria«, i. e. the afflicting and the salvific insistence of history within the present moment. On the one hand, memory inscribes itself onto spaces and bodies in the violent and painful fashion of Kafka's »Penal Colony« apparatus. On the other hand, it can, in the form of remembrance (*Eingedenken*), sublimate these very inscriptions. This sublimation usually involves some form of redemptive, timely (re-)verbalization, but Benjamin's conception of it varies. To gain a better insight into this inherent, varying tension, the article will take a closer look at the connection between pain, memory and law-positing violence in some Benjaminian texts, occasionally relating them to the historical background of his discussion.

Without doubt, Benjamin's thoughts on pain are significantly indebted to Nietzsche. Memory as a painful inscription into bodies has been a popular topic since Nietzsche called pain »the most powerful aid to mnemonics«.² He asserts and others have repeated that »only something which continues to hurt stays in the memory«.³ In the process of inscription, the body itself becomes a mnemonic device, a textual medium as well as »a hermeneutic machine«.⁴ Benjamin has emphasized the juridical component of this process, referring to it in his Kafka essay, where he uses the machine of the »Penal Colony« as its paradigm:

In the penal colony, those in power use an archaic apparatus which engraves letters with curlcues on the back of every guilty man, multiplying the stabs and piling up the ornaments to the point where the back of the guilty man becomes clairvoyant and is able to decipher the script from which he must derive the nature of his unknown guilt. (SW II, 812; GS II, 432)

In this context, pain is used both as the annunciation and as the implementation of judgment, stating the transgression and connecting it to a body. And via the

1 I want to thank Ilit Ferber for her valuable comments on the first draft of this paper.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche: »Das mächtigste Hilfsmittel der Mnemonik«, *Genealogie der Moral* 2.3, in: *Jenseits von Gut und Böse/Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 5, München (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag) 1999, p. 295.

3 »Nur was nicht aufhört, weh zu thun, bleibt im Gedächtniss.« (Ibid.).

4 Gerhard Richter: *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography*, Detroit (Wayne State University Press) 2000, p. 67.

body, pain inscribes its statements – readably or unreadably – into the mind, absorbing the subject and his attention thoroughly. In this way, pain may come to rule anyone’s life-world, binding a subject to a specific statement, for example to a perpetually reenacted drama of transgression and punishment, allowing the past to incarnate and insist within the present, and thus writing history. However, it is obviously a rather selective version of historiography: Its absorbing character also erases memories that are not compatible with it, thus remaking the world in its own image. In one of the »Denkbilder«, »Gewohnheit und Aufmerksamkeit«, Benjamin has pointed to an inherent connection between attention and pain, according to which »it is, as if [the soul in pain] no longer wished to return to the accustomed world – as if it now inhabited a new world in which pain is the quartermaster. Attentiveness and pain are complementary.« (SW II, 592; GS IV, 408) Pain thus directs attention to certain events and plots and forecloses others.

In an analogue fashion, pain opens historical time and eclipses paradisiacal time in the Christian tradition. For in Christianity, pain is first and foremost conceived and justified as the divine punishment of the first transgression, as the seal of the profanation by which Man fell out of the divine cosmic order. According to the Saint Augustine’s »Civitas Dei«, pain is nothing but the result and indicator of the Fall of Man; it denotes that the postlapsarian human body is no longer under the control of the human soul, and that the relationship of both has become inherently dissonant.⁵ But while pain is generated by the first transgression, it also punishes it, and thus reminds Man of his former, unfallen state and of the transcendent world to which he or she has lost direct access. Pain acts as a double bind, a cord connecting man both to earth and to the divine, indicating man’s fallenness and by this very indication also opening a path to the unfallen world of the Godhead. In the Bible, pain is accordingly often used as a proof of God’s existence and power. Especially in cases when Man demonstrates lack of faith, God tends to manifest as an afflicting force and to make his existence and status evident in this way while remaining himself unafflicted.⁶ For an old and not altogether uncontested doctrine, apparently also going back to Augustine, says that God the Father is »impassible«, that is, that he is not subject to pain or any other passion.⁷ (Of course, several passages of the Bible in which God is described as jealous, regretful, angry or joyous had to be assimilated and/ or reinterpreted accordingly.⁸)

Thus, degrees of pain mark and structure the world, and bodies enter into culture and society by way of these inscriptions. As Gerhard Richter puts it, »our

5 Aurelius Augustinus: *Der Gottesstaat/De Civitate Dei*, vol. 1, trans. Carl Johann Perl, Paderborn et al. (Schöningh) 1979, pp. 956–961 (14.15).

6 See for instance Ex 14,18; Ez 39,6, 26,6.

7 Augustinus: *Der Gottesstaat/De Civitate Dei* (note 5), p. 820 (12.17).

8 Cf. e.g. Robin A. Parry: *Lamentations. Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans), 2010, pp. 193–194.

body [...] names our simultaneous inscription in, and exile from history.⁹ In this context, it is important that these inscriptions don't necessarily have to be readable, they just need to be able to arrange bodies in disposable patterns; one might almost speak of *Kulturlandschaften* of pain. In a phenomenological vein, Elaine Scarry has analyzed how the alleviation and application of pain can make and unmake a subject's life-world, and how culture and society are perpetuated in the course of this making and unmaking.¹⁰ Expanding on her work and connecting it to Benjamin's, a few observations on pain and subjectivity might be made: On the one hand, one might say that pain incorporates and individuates the subject by brutally isolating it from the rest of the world and enclosing it within its own raw matter. Nothing marks the inherent limits of a subject and its insurmountable link to its body as unmistakably as pain. On the other hand, pain also seems to eliminate the boundaries between inside and outside, between *psyche* and *physis*: The intense pain of torture can destroy all sense of inhabiting a body that is one's own, even that of a stable self. It destructs the space in which the subject can sustain and define itself, thus depersonalizing it. All that remains is a piece of quivering flesh, as open and accessible as can be, thoroughly subdued and exposed to an outside world of objects, of which it has become largely indistinguishable.¹¹ According to these descriptions, pain seems both to impose and to dissolve the boundaries which constitute a subject. Yet the contradiction is only apparent, since both processes take place at the same time: The infliction of pain marks the border between inside and outside world, but it marks it as blurry and displaceable, as a line that can easily be crossed, redrawn or even dissolved by the application of violence.¹² Outside and inside world are both experienced as uncertain, manipulable constructs. Through pain, the subject is produced as a definable, delimitable unit, one might say, as *Gestalt*, but a *Gestalt* that it has not chosen by itself, but which is imposed upon it. The power to inflict or alleviate pain has therefore always been regarded as a form of absolute power, situated at the point of intersection of that which transcends and of that which inheres in the individual. In the works of de Sade, among others, the resultant phantasm is developed that the tortured subject might be made to incarnate the torturer, or at least to incarnate the law he imposes.¹³ Pain is positioned as beyond, or rather, as

9 Richter: *Walter Benjamin* (note 4), p. 69.

10 Elaine Scarry: *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford/New York (Oxford University Press) 1985.

11 Cf. Jean Améry: *At the Mind's Limits. Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld/Stella Rosenfeld, Bloomington/Indianapolis (Indiana University Press) 1980.

12 Juan-David Nasio: *The Book of Love and Pain. Thinking at the Limit with Freud and Lacan*, Albany/NY (SUNY Press) 2004, p. 14.

13 Cf. e. g. Donatien Alphonse François de Sade: *Juliette*, New York (Grove) 1968, pp. 369–370. See also Jacques Lacan: »Kant avec Sade«, in: Id.: *Écrits*, 2 vols., Paris (Seuil) 1971.

underlying the dichotomies which are basic for human orientation in the world, and thus it can move our boundary posts around in disquieting ways, imposing palpable statements from its privileged position where words are made flesh.

These reflexions link up with Benjamin's *Trauerspielbuch* as well as with the »Critique of Violence« in which destructive and pain-inflicting acts are made out to be at the basis of the legal order. According to the »Critique of Violence«, the order of society always demands a founding act of violence, a »positing« (SW I, 242; »Setzung«, GS II, 188), which is also an inscribing. Benjamin's main example from the world of myth is the story of Niobe whose children are killed by Artemis and Apollo. It is certainly significant that Benjamin emphasizes the founding, law-positing force not so much of the death of these children, but of the pain of Niobe herself, a pain which petrifies her and thus turns her into a silent monument, »Boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods« (SW I, 248; GS II, 197: »Markstein der Grenze zwischen Menschen und Göttern«). If death indeed »digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance«,¹⁴ then because it is mournfully and insistently remembered by the bereaved survivors.

If the infliction of pain can be seen as the ground of the legal order, might it not also be seen, once more in Nietzschean fashion, as the hidden, irreducible ground of the order of language *tout court*? Benjamin seems to suggest as much, when he declares it a part of his critical project to decode traces of afflicting violence within the most ordinary of texts. He states that the project of Karl Kraus (which Benjamin in this respect assimilates to his own) demands a reader »for whom even in a subordinate clause, in a particle, indeed in a comma, mute torn scraps and nerve-fibers quiver« and for whom even »from the obscurest and driest fact still hangs a piece of mutilated flesh« (SW II, 441; GS II, 346). According to this statement, to really read a text is to read its wounds, or rather, to read it *as* a wound. The task is to perceive the pain which hovers on the fringes of language, beyond the control of speech and writing, yet intimately involved with them, drawing their contours and enabling them, but also threatening their coherence. For it is notable that pain marks phenomena at the limits of language: It makes speech dissolve into the cry of pain, or it causes language to run out and lapse into traumatized silence. However, language also seems to grow from these fringes: The reflexive pain cry of the newborn involves it in a primal and unintentional communication. From this first, basic utterance, modifications in vocalization will develop which will subsequently be treated as meaningful; pain thus is transformed into a signifier, opening the void which signification will unsuccessfully

14 Walter Benjamin: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London/New York (Verso) 1998, p. 166; subsequently abbreviated as »OT« and cited by page number. »[W]eil am tiefsten der Tod die zackige Demarkationslinie zwischen Physis und Bedeutung einräbt.« (GS I, 343).

try to fill.¹⁵ Pain is an event that we never really manage to express, but it is also what we do not cease trying to express.¹⁶ Pain management always involves the attempt to find a language or a system of symbols which is able both to approximately describe and to modify the distribution of pain within bodies. The success of this endeavour has turned out to be partial up to now, so that languages both provisionally sublimate and perpetuate the pain and the scream persisting within them.

A loss of confidence in language and a resultant traumatized silence may be another effect of pain. In the *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin insistently designates silence as a form of mourning for being deprived of the true word, mourning the lack of fallen language. Fallen nature both laments in silence and laments its silence which is disposable for whatever arbitrary meaning may be ascribed to it (OT, 224; GS I, 398). This silence persists within fallen language as something that exceeds language, but is vainly grasping for a better one. Benjamin sees in classical tragedy a transforming representation of this pain-induced, creaturely silence searching for words; it is the silence of the tragic protagonist, such as Oedipus, Antigone, or Orestes. The true matter of tragedy, according to Benjamin, consists in their attempt to raise themselves up »amid the agitation of [the] painful world« (OT, 110; GS I, 289) of mythic, law-positing violence. Tragedy is conceived as a revision and resumption of the process of »Setzung«. In this theatrical trial, writes Benjamin, the audience is confronted with

the silence of the [tragic] hero, which neither looks for nor finds any justification and therefore throws suspicion back onto his [divine, law-positing] persecutors. For its meaning is inverted: what appears before the public is not the guilt of the accused but the evidence of speechless suffering, and the tragedy which appeared to be devoted to the judgment of the hero is transformed into a hearing about the Olympians in which the latter appears as a witness and, against the will of the gods, displays »the honour of the demi-god«. [...] [For] in tragedy pagan man realizes that he is better than his gods, but this realization strikes him dumb, and it remains unarticulated. (OT, 109–110; GS I, 288)

Subsequently, Benjamin develops that the dumbfoundedness of the hero can also express itself in a scream, that »the hero's word, on those isolated occasions when it breaks through the rigid armour of the self, becomes a cry of protest« (OT, 116; GS I, 295). However, the essential argument is that this silent or inarticulate suffering, culminating in the tragic hero's demise, ultimately engenders a new

15 Cf. e. g. Marcia Cavell: *The Psychoanalytic Mind. From Freud to Philosophy*, Cambridge/Mass. (Harvard University Press) 1993, p. 223.

16 Cf. Gilles Deleuze: *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, London/New York (Continuum) 2004, pp. 176–178.

language. For the word »of a distant community« is born out of the tragic death. »In the presence of the suffering hero the community learns reverence and gratitude for the word with which the hero's death endowed it« (OT, 109; GS I, 288), Benjamin writes. For example, the statement that man is better than the pagan Gods; Saint Augustine, at the latest, will have said it out loud.¹⁷ Through this word, tragedy leads from one order of nature and society to the next one, and Benjamin hints at the fact that the latter will be basically Christian. However, that transfer does not really solve the problem, for the positing powers of pain return with a vengeance within Christianity, as the *Trauerspiel* articulates. For at the core of the *Trauerspiel*, the suffering subject in the form of the martyr is represented, or rather the process in which this subject becomes a dismembered, emblematic body. According to Benjamin, all *Trauerspiel* follows the pattern of martyr-drama, even the royal drama (*Königsdrama*). For the king is similar to the martyr in that he suffers in the name of mankind; the martyr's crown of thorns and the royal crown are frequently equated. Benjamin writes that martyr-dramas »are not so much concerned with the deeds of the hero as with his suffering, and frequently not so much with his spiritual torment as with the agony of the physical adversity which befalls him« (OT, 72; GS I, 252). The martyr-king is a Christ-like figure, repeating the Christ event of the Passion, that is, of suffering pain unto death. Benjamin points out that the martyr takes on most attributes of Christ: He or she is the paragon of all virtues, abandoned by friends and enemies, and he sacrifices himself, overcoming his sufferings by fortitude (OT 72–73; GS I, 252).

In the *Trauerspiel*, the dramatic form engages with the new relation to pain which has been instigated by Christianity. For the figure of the suffering Christ seems to open a general way by which the difference between the impassible Godhead and his long-suffering creatures might be sublated or at least minimized. Christian orthodoxy purports that Christ by his own free will changed from an impassible into a passible being and took upon himself the pain of the world, thereby initiating a convergence of transcendence and immanence. In this context, a commonplace of devotional literature is important, namely that the body of Christ was the most perfect of all bodies and hence also the most tender and sensitive of all bodies. Every pain of every human being could therefore be conceived as a fractional part of Christ's pain at the cross which was the maximum pain that could ever possibly be felt.¹⁸ The representation of the suffering Corpus Christi therefore provides all members of the Christian community with an opportunity for identification, that is, for a general communion in a

17 Augustinus: *Der Gottesstaat/De Civitate Dei* (note 5), vol. 1, pp. 146–149 (3.3).

18 Cf. e. g. Esther Cohen: *The Modulated Scream. Pain in Late Medieval Culture*, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 2010, pp. 205–226.

superlatively intense affect of suffering. However, this rapprochement between the divine and his passible creatures cannot overcome the fact that Christianity is caught in a positing pattern, too: It also attempts to structure and make sense of the world with the aid of afflictions. And this pattern of action unfolds in the *Trauerspiel* as well as the emblem books, within the frame of a post-Reformation world in which the old relation between the visible and the invisible, the sign and the thing has become questionable and seems in need of reordering. Benjamin writes:

Above all: what is the significance of those scenes of cruelty and anguish in which the baroque drama revels? It is of a piece with the un-self-conscious and unreflective attitude of baroque art criticism that there is not a torrent of direct replies. A concealed but valuable one is contained in the statement that: »Integrum humanum corpus symbololicam iconem ingredi non posse, partem tamen corporis ei constituendae non esse ineptam.« [The whole human body cannot enter a symbolical icon, but it is not inappropriate for a part of the body to constitute it.] This occurs in the account of a controversy about the norms of emblematics. The orthodox emblematicist could not think differently: The human body could be no exception to the commandment which ordered the destruction of the organic, so that the true meaning, as it was written and ordained, might be picked up from its fragments. Where, indeed, could this law be more triumphantly displayed than in the man who abandons his conventional, conscious *physis* in order to scatter it to the manifold regions of meaning? [...] If martyrdom thus prepares the body of the living person for emblematic purposes, it is not without significance that physical pain as such was ever present for the dramatist to use as an element in action. [...] Since, in fact, the spirit is in itself pure reason, true to itself, and it is physical influences alone which bring it into contact with the world, the torture which it endures was a more immediate basis of violent emotions, than so-called tragic conflicts. And if it is in death that the spirit becomes free, in the manner of spirits, it is not until then that the body too comes properly into its own. For this much is self-evident: the allegorization of the *physis* can only be carried through in all its vigour in respect of the corpse. And the characters of the *Trauerspiel* die, because it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter into the homeland of allegory. It is not for the sake of immortality that they meet their end, but for the sake of the corpse. (OT, 216–218; GS I, 390–392)

Once more, death, in this context, is conceived as the pinnacle of pain. But while the *Trauerspiel* insists on this form of sense production by means of martyred »membra dissecta«, it also exposes the endless variability and finally the emptiness of the sense that the pain of the Christ figure makes. His or her fragmented body is delivered, »ausgeliefert«, to the gaze of any spectator, a victim to positing sense productions. The uncertainty of salvational interpretations, which Jane Newman

has analyzed in the case of »Katharina von Georgien«, seems relevant in this context.¹⁹ Hence, no new and true word is to be found in the *Trauerspiel*, only the silence of mourning and the mournful arbitrariness of signification in which everything can signify everything else, but no definitive referent can be detected. That might partly explain Benjamin's remark that, in the *Trauerspiel*, only the physical pain of martyrdom responds to the call of history (OT, 91; GS I, 270). Any transcendence that would go beyond pain becomes uncertain.

What consequences does this state of things have for the ideal spectator of the *Trauerspiel*, namely the melancholic allegorist? He is the one who contemplates the allegoric »membra disjecta« not only in theatre, but everywhere, since he sees the world as their accumulation, »[c]ollection of everything memorable« (OT, 92; GS I, 271: »die Zusammenlegung alles Gedächtniswürdigen«). As a result, he too falls into mourning, into the silence of the overdetermined and overdetermining creation. Benjamin writes about the results of the allegorist's contemplations, which compose a »Leidensgeschichte der Welt«:

Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death's head. And although such a thing lacks all »symbolic« freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity – nevertheless, this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline. (OT, 166; GS I, 343)

The world unfolding under the gaze of the allegorist is unified by pain, but pain is not able to build a bridge toward eternity. In the same vein, both Lutherans and Calvinists stated that the suffering of pain will not allow a subject to draw nearer to the transcendental realm; that it bears no spiritual merits in itself.²⁰ Hence pain itself is to be found among the »membra disjecta«. The mournful allegorist remains stuck in the world of material objects, faithful at best to its most powerful, unifying emblems. Is he thus the good, obedient subject of the law-positing, power-wielding order of state and church? Or is he the one who pushes obedience to the point where it subverts itself? For at the end of the *Trauerspielbuch*,

19 Jane O. Newman: »Die Aporie der Allegorie. Das Theatrum Mundi des deutschen Trauerspiels«, in: Björn Quiring (ed.): *Theatrum Mundi. Die Metapher des Welttheaters von Shakespeare bis Beckett*, Berlin (August) 2012.

20 Cf. e. g. Jan Frans van Dikhuizen: »Partakers of Pain. Religious Meanings of Pain in Early Modern England«, in: Jan Frans van Dikhuizen/Karl Ehenkel (eds.): *The Sense of Suffering: Constructions of Physical Pain in Early Modern Culture*, Leiden/Boston (Brill) 2009, p. 212.

Benjamin seems to present the allegorist's salvation and his escape from an empty and oppressive world: He offers a very dialectical redemption in which the accumulation of trophies and empty memorials of suffering suddenly becomes readable as the anticipation of an apocatastatic resurrection. The allegorical skull starts to speak of the next world:

The bleak confusion of Golgotha which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of the engravings and descriptions of the period, is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it, transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection. Ultimately, in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem. (OT, 232; GS I, 405–406)

For this thoroughly allegorized, empty world also turns out to be the world of God. (OT, 232; GS I, 406). However, this reversal does not solve the religious and political problems of pain and signification. Rather, as a *deus ex machina*, it forcibly reinserts a theological argument into a situation in which it has already become questionable. That the world of God was experienced as painful, thoroughly empty and disposable has been the main cause for the allegorist's mournful juxtapositions and contemplations in the first place, and the dialectic reversal has not transported him beyond this world, but right back into it. The comfort he receives remains entangled in the pain and uncertainty he is still bound to experience. The emphatically proclaimed redemption thus appears quite doubtful on closer inspection. The skulls of Golgotha still can mean everything, including resurrection, but it is hard to see why this signification should appear privileged. If the skull can also mean its opposite, one might say that it insists beyond signification, ceasing to make sense. At best, then, the allegory manages to allegorize allegorization itself: If the allegorical »corpus« signifies anything particular, it most poignantly signifies the fact that it can mean anything at all, and that the work of sense-making is consequently never done. Accordingly, what is saved is only the allegory, which comes away from the transaction empty-handed, as Benjamin himself explicates (OT, 233; GS I, 406: »Leer aus geht die Allegorie.«).²¹

The passage through the pain of attentive remembrance may produce salvation – but a form of salvation which leads right back into the afflicted world without being able to transcend it; and so, the dialectical relation between contemplative allegorical reading and suffering must remain a »dialectics at a standstill«. The reversal doesn't save us from mourning, it saves mourning itself. Nicolas Pethes has

21 Cf. Bettine Menke: *Das Trauerspiel-Buch. Der Souverän – das Trauerspiel – Konstellationen – Ruinen*, Bielfeld (transcript) 2010, S. 229–230.

already pointed out that allegoresis does not allow anybody to remember or recuperate things that have been lost, but is rather the means by which the suppressed and forgotten *qua* suppressed and forgotten, the demolished *qua* demolished can be kept within the tradition and within memory.²² In that respect, one might say that allegoresis inserts oblivion into the field of memory and gives it right of residence. In the form of allegory, memory presents itself as a form of oblivion, as structured oblivion, and demands indirectly that it become recognized as such.

In »Erzählung und Heilung«, another one of his »Denkbilder«, and in »Das Fieber«, its reworking for the *Berliner Kindheit*, Benjamin gives an interesting twist to his reflections on the connections between pain, remembrance and oblivion (SW II, 724–725, GS IV, 430; SW III, 362–365, GS IV, 269–273). He describes the domestic circumstances of his childhood illnesses, stating that the healing process often was initiated by his mother who told him stories of his ancestors and mingled them with caresses. And the current of her narrations happened to carry his symptoms away. »Caresses laid a bed for this current [of narratives]« (SW III, 363; GS IV, 270) he writes:

This provokes the question [...] of whether every illness might not be cured if it could only be made to float along the river of narrative until it reached the mouth. If we reflect that pain is a dam that offers resistance to the current of narrative, it is evident that the dam will be pierced when the gradient is steep enough, for the current to carry anything it meets into the sea of happy oblivion. (SW II, 724, trans. modified; GS IV, 430)

Remarkably, in this metaphor the memorable words of the ancestral stories appear not as pain-inducing inscriptions, but as a pain-relieving and de-inscribing form of movement. Pain is metaphorized as an immobilization, freezing the free flow of language. And the semantics of this language flow seem to be altogether secondary, for, according to the metaphor, its unstable current, the turbulent, moving mass of stories alone seems to do the saving trick. Whether they are true or untrue is not so much the question; it is more important that any one story can be augmented by another. Perhaps the notion of the asignifying »mother tongue« sketched by H el ene Cixous might prove useful in this context.²³ In any case, this current of narration is closely connected to forgetting, for it leads straight toward

22 Nicolas Pethes: *Mnemographie. Poetiken der Erinnerung und Destruktion nach Walter Benjamin*, T ubingen (Niemeyer) 1999, p. 383.

23 »Dans la langue que je parle, vibre la langue maternelle, langue de ma m re, moins langue que musique, moins syntaxe que chant de mots.« H el ene Cixous: *Entre l' criture*, Paris (Des femmes) 1986, p. 31.

the realm of oblivion. Apparently, the true, beneficial goal of remembrance is the dissolution of inscriptions.²⁴

Nothing prevents us from connecting this »Denkbild« to the »Theological-Political Fragment« which stresses that »in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall« and that »nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away« (SW III, 305–306, GS II, 204). The language of stories and caresses might be conceived as a constituent element of the messianic. And if the connection is accepted, the Benjaminian field of transcendence becomes largely indistinguishable from his sea of happy oblivion. The weak powers of the messianic only ever pass by and in passing lead everything toward its »Vergängnis«. Memories that are no longer »binding« nor »bound«, become somewhat volatile, forever »whizzing by«.²⁵ In what Benjamin designates as the messianic »Zufallen der Vergangenheit«,²⁶ a peculiar play between disposability and non-disposability is at work (obliquely expressed in the ambiguity of the German word »zufallen«): The redeemed subject attains the past, but only in the mode of withdrawal. In this perspective, it becomes obvious that the melancholic and the redemptive kinds of memory cannot be neatly separated; they tend to contaminate and blend into each other. There is no way beyond this impurity; accordingly, since salvation remains entangled in immanence, even the relation between redemptive remembrance and suffering remains caught in a »dialectics at a standstill«.

24 Cf. Jeanne Marie Gagnebin: *Geschichte und Erzählung bei Walter Benjamin*, trans. Judith Klein, Würzburg (Königshausen & Neumann) 2001, pp. 112–113. In this context, it is significant that Benjamin calls the current which carries the resistant inscriptions into oblivion also the »stream of narratable life«: »Es fällt darauf ein noch helleres Licht, wenn man bedenkt, daß Schmerz [...] gewissermaßen als Damm die Lebensäfte absperrt, die als Nebenflüsse in den großen epischen Strom des Daseins – des erzählbaren Lebens – münden wollen.« (GS IV, 1008) »Narratability« might be one of Benjamin's famous »-abilities«, even though it is not explicitly mentioned by Samuel Weber. Cf. Samuel Weber: *Benjamin's -abilities*, Cambridge (Mass.)/London (Harvard University Press) 2008.

25 »Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit *buscht* vorbei.« (GS I, 695).

26 »Freilich fällt erst der erlösten Menschheit ihre Vergangenheit vollauf zu.« (GS I, 694).