Daniel Weidner · Sigrid Weigel (Hg.)
Benjamin-Studien 3

Daniel Weidner · Sigrid Weigel (Hg.)

Benjamin-Studien 3

Wilhelm Fink

Die Drucklegung dieses Werkes wurde unterstützt mit den Mitteln des Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Forschung unter den Förderkennzeichen 1UG0712 und 01UG1412.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

(Wilhelm Fink GmbH & Co. Verlags-KG, Jühenplatz 1, D-33098 Paderborn)
Internet: www.fink.de

Lektorat: Bettina Moll, Berlin; www.texttiger.de
Satz: Tilo Lothar Rölleke, Berlin
Einbandgestaltung: Evelyn Ziegler, München
Printed in Germany
Herstellung: Ferdinand Schöningh GmbH & Co. KG, Paderborn

ISBN 978-3-7705-5782-0

Ilit Ferber

»Schmerz war ein Staudamm« Benjamin on Pain[1]

Language and Pain

Pain is customarily deemed to be the most self-evident and irrefutable demarcation of the borders of language. It incises the unbridgeable line between the intensity of our experience of pain and the utter disintegration of our ability to express it in words. It is as if when we are in pain, our words crumble, at times abruptly shatter, as pain hurls our linguistic capacities into the deep chasm between pain and its expression. As Virginia Woolf writes, »For pain words are lacking. There should be cries, cracks, fissures.«[2] Elsewhere she observes: »Let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other [...] so as to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out.«[3] A similar idea regarding the inherent separation between the suffering of pain and the possibility of its linguistic expression was developed by Elaine Scarry, who famously claimed that pain establishes its very identity, or in her words, achieves it by ensuring its own unsharability by destroying language: »Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.«[4] Not only is there a stark

1 I am grateful to Daniel Weidner and the anonymous reviewer of *Benjamin-Studien 3* for their helpful remarks on an earlier version of this text.

2 Virginia Woolf: *The Waves*, New York (Harcourt Inc.) 1978, p. 263.

3 Id.: »On Being Ill«, in: David Bradshaw (ed.): *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, Oxford (Oxford University Press) 2008, p. 102.

4 Elaine Scarry: *The Body In Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford (Oxford University Press) 1985, p. 4. An entirely different and important approach to the problem of pain's resistance to language, tackled from an ethical point of view, can be found amongst several of Stanley Cavell's readings of Wittgenstein, especially his »Knowing and Acknowledging«, in: *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2002, pp. 238–266. Referring to Cavell's exemplary text, Veena Das lucidly comments: »Pain, in this rendering, is not that inexpressible something that destroys communication or marks an exit from one's existence in language. Instead, it makes a claim asking for acknowledgement, which may be given or denied. In either case, it is not a referential statement that is simply pointing to an inner object.« Veena Das: »Language and Body. Transactions in the Construction of Pain«, in: *Daedalus* 125 (1996) 1, p. 70.

demarcation between pain and language in Scarry's account, but the experience of intense pain gains its power precisely by robbing its victim of his or her ability to express it in language. The threat that pain poses to human beings thus lies in its staggering ability to transform individuals into savage animals – to transmute them into suffering, howling, screaming beasts, no longer able to assert the very capacity that defines them as humans – the ability to use language.

Yet despite the cogency of Scarry's work on pain (especially in its political framework), her argument raises some difficulties. Obviously, intense pain almost always deprives us of the ability to describe or articulately speak about it; it shuts us down within a threatening solipsistic expanse from which no utterance, no matter how intense, can be received by another. However, this raises the question whether it is accurate to say that what defines pain is solely its ability to deprive us of our linguistic capacities and thereby, of our very humanity (for Scarry, the two are clearly intertwined). Or should we argue, rather, that the human condition is constituted not only by man being a speaking-animal, but also, and maybe foremost, by his ability to feel pain? Is not this dialectic of our vulnerability to pain on the one hand, and our profound ability to bear it on the other, what makes us human in the first place?

Nietzsche develops a corresponding idea when he designates what he calls »the gift of suffering« as the sole cause of every human enhancement (*Erhöhungen*):

> The tension that breeds strength into the unhappy soul, its shudder at the sight of great destruction, its inventiveness and courage in enduring, surviving, interpreting, and exploiting unhappiness and whatever depth, secrecy, whatever masks, spirit, cunning, greatness it has been given: – weren't these the gifts of suffering, of the disciple of great suffering?[5]

For Nietzsche, the struggle with pain and suffering does not end in, or lead to, the hermetic separation between the experience of pain and the condition of being human; on the contrary: man's wrestling with his pains is precisely what defines him as a human being, whose strength is measured not by the ability to subjugate pain, but by his capacity to bear it, to contain pain's intensity within the confines of the human.

On the background of these preliminary remarks on the relationship between pain and language, Benjamin figures prominently. Although it would be difficult to single out pain, especially physical pain, as a predominant theme in Benjamin's writings, there is nevertheless a surprising cluster of short texts in which Benjamin

5 Friedrich Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2002, § 225, p. 117.

repeatedly tackles the problem of pain and especially its relation to language.[6] In »Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,« a fragment written probably during 1922–1923, Benjamin singles out pain as the sensation that finds its fullest realization only in man. According to Benjamin, »the essence of man is the most consummate instrument of pain: only in human suffering does pain arrive at its most purified, appropriate manifestation; only in human life does it flow to its destination« (SW I, 397, trans. altered; »Das Wesen des Menschen ist das vollkommenste Instrument des Schmerzes; nur im menschlichen Leiden kommt der Schmerz zu seiner reinsten adäquaten Erscheinung, nur im menschlichen Leben mündet er«, GS VI, 83). These lines make clear that Benjamin offers an alternative model to Scarry's. What distinguishes pain is not its ability to destroy man, but rather, that it is exclusively in the human body (and nowhere else) that pain comes to its fullest realization. Pain's persistent rootedness in the body, its tenacious hold on it, is therefore not to be understood as an attempt to overpower man or deprive him of his human essence. According to Benjamin, the human body is not pain's fiercest rival, but its most consummate vessel (»vollkommenste Instrument«). Accordingly, pain does not extinguish or obliterate humanity – rather, it is in the realm of the human that pain achieves its purest, most heightened form of expression.

Benjamin continues to argue that there exists a »metaphysical difference« separating pain (*Schmerz*) and pleasure (*Lust*) a difference evidenced in pain's unique correspondence with the soul: »in pain, without any recourse to metaphor, the sensuous words directly implicate the soul« (SW I, 397; »daß im Schmerz ohne alle Metaphorik unmittelbar mit dem Sinnlichen das Seelische betroffen ist«, GS VI, 82). To explicate what distinguishes pain, Benjamin elaborates:

> Of all corporeal feelings, pain alone is like a navigable river which never dries up and which leads man down to the sea. [...] Pain [...] is a link between worlds. This is why organic pleasure is intermittent, whereas pain can be permanent. This comparison of pleasure and pain explains why the cause of pain is irrelevant for

6 Due to the restricted scope of this essay, my discussion will be limited and will include only a few of the texts in which Benjamin discusses the problem of pain. Other significant references within Benjamin's oeuvre include the following: »Tyrant as Martyr, Martyr as Tyrant« (1925; *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London [Verso] 1998 [cited as TS], pp. 72–74; GS I, 251–253) and »The Corpse as Emblem« (TS, 215–220; GS I, 390–393); »The Happiness of Ancient Man« (1916; *Early Writing 1910–1917*, Cambridge [Harvard University Press] 2001, pp. 228–232; GS II, 126–129); *Ibizan Sequence*: »Habit and Attentiveness« (1932; SW II, 592; GS IV, 407–408) and »Downhill« (SW II, 592–593; GS IV, 408–409). See also my discussion of martyrdom, pain, and expression in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book: Ilit Ferber: *Philosophy and Melancholy. Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language*, Stanford (Stanford University Press) 2013, pp. 74–102.

> the understanding of man's nature, whereas the source of his greatest pleasure is extremely important. For every pain, even the most trivial one, can lead upward to the highest religious suffering, whereas pleasure is not capable of any enhancement, and owes any nobility it possesses to the grace of its birth – that is to say, its source. (SW I, 397)[7]

In these important lines, pain's unique strength is linked not to its origin (this is reserved for pleasure), but rather to the way that its strenuous flow throughout the suffering body has the power to lead it to infinite heights. In contrast to pleasure, which is forever seeking out its sources, pain manifests itself most consummately when it is intensified; it fulfills itself most deeply by gradually reenforcing its own fortitude.[8] To make sense of pain, therefore, we must understand the nature of its *movement*: and in Benjamin's metaphor of the »navigable river« – its flow. In what follows, I develop Benjamin's idea of the nature of pain as manifested in the internal law of its flow in two other of Benjamin's texts: *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (1934) and *Thought Figures* (1933).

The Child Is Sick

Let me begin with a section from *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (1934) in which Benjamin recounts his memories of being sick as a child (»The Fever«, SW III, 362–365; GS IV, 269–273). He recalls his childhood illnesses and the unique existential experience of »being ill« and as a child, illness indeed becomes an existential state. The illness invades quietly, »considerately and skillfully,« and confidently inhabits the child's body. Called to the sickbed, the doctor forbids him to get up, to go to school, and even to read books. The child's being is now condensed into one single space – his bed. Benjamin recalls how his mother would come into the room to make his bed and how, watching her while lying

7 »Der Schmerz allein unter allen Körpergefühlen ist für den Menschen gleichsam ein schiffbarer Strom mit nie versiegendem Wasser, der ihn ins Meer führt. [...] Schmerz [ist] eine Verbindung zwischen den Welten. Daher ist die organische Lust intermittierend, während der Schmerz permanent werden kann. Mit diesem Verhältnis von Lust und Schmerz hängt es zusammen, daß für die Wesenserkenntnis eines Menschen der Anlaß seines höchsten Schmerzes gleichgültig, der Anlaß seiner höchsten Lust jedoch sehr wichtig ist. Denn jeder, auch der nichtigste Schmerz läßt sich bis zum äußersten religiösen hinaufführen, die Lust aber ist keiner Veredlung fähig und hat ihren ganzen Adel allein von Gnaden ihrer Geburt, will sagen ihres Anlasses.« (GS VI, 83).

8 Cf. Nietzsche's remarks on the relationship between pain, pleasure and origin: »Pain always asks for the cause, while pleasure is inclined to stop with itself and not look back.« (Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche: *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, Cambridge [Cambridge University Press] 2001, § 13, p. 38).

on the sofa, he would remember the tray of food served to him in bed. The thought of food, however, does not stir hunger in the sick child, at least not for food. It evokes, rather, a different type of hunger, Benjamin explains, one in which »the body craved stories« (SW III, 363; »gelüstete ihn nach Geschichten«, GS IV, 270).

The memory continues as his mother approaches the bed; she caresses his pained body with her loving hands and begins to tell him stories. Benjamin describes these stories as »vigorous currents« of water flowing through his ailing body. At first, the story's current trickles slowly, but gradually the stream strengthens and becomes so forceful that it carries away the illness, into what Benjamin calls »the sea of oblivion.« In this description, Benjamin links the imagery of flowing water both to his mother's storytelling and to her caressing hands. Portraying the intimate, affectionate moment of encounter between aching child and loving mother, he recalls how he loved her caressing hands, which »laid a bed for [...] [the story's] current« (SW III, 363; »Das Streicheln bahnte diesem Strom sein Bett«, GS IV, 270) and adds: »for in my mother's hand there were stories rippling, which I might later hear from her lips« (SW III, 363; »in der Hand der Mutter rieselten schon Geschichten, welche bald in Fülle ihrem Mund entströmen sollten«, GS IV, 270–271). The mother's gentle strokes prepare the pained, infirm body for the vigorous healing water currents of the anticipated bedtime story.

A second text to consider is a fragment from Benjamin's *Denkbilder* (1933 »Storytelling and Healing«, SW II, 724–725; GS IV, 430), which begins with the following line: »The child is sick. His mother puts him to bed and sits down beside him. And then she begins to tell him stories« (SW II, 724; »Das Kind ist krank. Die Mutter bringt's zu Bett und setzt sich zu ihm. Und dann beginnt sie, ihm Geschichten zu erzählen«, GS IV, 430).

Benjamin continues by asking, »How are we to understand this?« and answers this question by recounting what his friend N. (Felix Noeggerath) told him about the healing powers of his wife's hands.[9] He calls her healing powers »sonderbar« (unique or strange) and, in the *Anmerkungen* to the text, characterizes her healing hands as being »Schmerzstillen«: namely, having a styptic quality, as if they could stop someone's bleeding when placed on an open wound. N. is unable to fully describe or account for this magical, unexplainable healing power of the hands; he only says, resorting to metaphor, »It is *as if* they were telling a story« (SW II, 724, my emphasis; »Es war, als ob sie eine Geschichte erzählten«, GS IV, 430). The story told by the loving mother sitting at her sick child's bedside merges here with the tales told (metaphorically) by the expressive movements of N.'s wife's hands.

9 Cf. Benjamin's *Anmerkungen* to the *Denkbilder* in GS IV, 1007–1008.

In both versions, storytelling is invoked to emphasize the place where pain and care meet, a convergence that enables care to heal pain through storytelling, be it via the mother's voice or the wife's touch. In the *Denkbilder*, too, Benjamin uses water metaphors to describe the relationship between storytelling and healing: »every illness might be cured if it could only float along the river of narrative – until it reached the mouth [...] Stroking marks out a bed for this torrent« (SW II, 724–725; »Ja ob nicht jede Krankheit heilbar wäre, wenn sie nur weit genug – bis an die Mündung – sich auf dem Strome des Erzählens verflößen ließe? [...] Das Streicheln zeichnet diesem Strom ein Bett«, GS IV, 430).[10]

Looking at these two texts together, we find some distinct similarities. Both present an almost identical scene, in which a child lies sick in bed and his mother approaches him, sits by his bed, strokes him with her hand, and tells him stories. What Benjamin emphasizes about this intimate, tender mother-child encounter are the hands and mouth. The hands' touch makes way for the story's entrance into the child's body, as if carving out the empty channel into which the story's current will soon pour. In the *Kindheit*, the caresses »lay the bed« for the story's stream (»bahnte diesem Strom sein Bett«), and in the *Denkbilder*, containing almost similar phrasing, the caress »marks out« the current's course (»zeichnet diesem Strom ein Bett«). (Note the interesting ambiguity of »bed« here – the child's bed and the water-current bed.) As for the mouth, it appears in two different variations. In the *Kindheit*, it is the story's wellspring, the origin of what will later become the vigorous current of the narrative; in the *Denkbilder*, the mouth marks the exit-point of the illness, the gate from which it will flow out of the sick, pain-ridden body.

Another interesting variation between the two accounts lies in the characterization of the content of the story. In the *Kindheit*, Benjamin's mother tells him stories about his ancestors, »conjured up before me,« he writes, »as though to make me understand that it was premature for me to give away, by an early death, the splendid trump cards which I held in my hand, thanks to my origins« (SW III, 363). The mother tells the child stories about his family origins, about the source of her kinship to him. They both belong to the same origin whose expression, in the story's content, brings about the powerful flood of the healing narrative. The story is told *to* the child, but it is about him, and moreover, it is *about* his relationship with his mother, the storyteller. Interestingly, the healing powers of the mother's touch and voice are deemed to be much more powerful than the child's ability to tell of his own pains, to share them. The question of the possibility to express pain, to tell it until it is exhausted, is here conceived

10 Cf. Benjamin's *Anmerkungen* for a slightly different use of »Mündung«: »[*Schmerz*] *gewissermaßen als Damm die Lebenssäfte absperrt, die, als Nebenflüsse in den großen epischen Strom des Daseins – des erzählbaren Lebens – münden wollen*« (GS IV, 1008).

not as a possibility available only to the suffering subject, but as something that can be exercised by others. The mother's story voices the pain, thereby healing it, although this is not her own pain to tell. This configuration poses a challenge to the customary philosophical accounts of the privacy of pain.[11]

In the *Denkbilder*, Benjamin discusses the association between storytelling and healing within two parallel frameworks. The first presents the healing power of storytelling in the *Merseburg Incantations*, which gain their magic powers by contextualizing the spells within a story (in the second of the spells, for instance, in the story of the horse's broken leg). This model is linked to the image of the mother and the child, in which the magic power of words is communicated by the healer (mother, magician) and not by the sick subject of her ministrations. The presentation of the healing power in the second model is concealed in the story that the sick man tells his doctor (in the version of the *Anmerkungen*, it is the psychoanalyst); that is, in the story the sick person himself tells, and not in a story told to *him*. In both cases, according to Benjamin, the story functions as »the first stage in the healing process,« and provokes the question whether storytelling is not, in fact, the »most favorable precondition for healing (SW II, 724; GS IV, 430).«

Despite these variations, one thing is evident: Benjamin is interested in the practice of story*telling* much more than in the content of any specific story. This is manifest, for instance, when the mother's hands are described (in both texts) as telling a story with their caressing movements. In other words, the movement of the language spoken to the child and the voice that expresses it are much more important than the words' referential content. This emphasis also appears in Benjamin's repeated use of water metaphors, underlying the dynamics of the narrative itself, which is here markedly a narrative that is told out loud rather than one that is written or read.[12] What the child's illness surrenders to is the mother's caress and the soothing sound of her voice. That the story is told, voiced and not read, deems it consequential also when taking into account that at the end of the story, pain's current flows into oblivion, sinks into forgetfulness. This is where the voice's fleeting nature, its inherent fading out and slow disappearance, reflects the idea of pain being forgotten rather than being written down (as opposed to the case of testimony).

11 Interestingly enough, this goes along with some of Scarry's argument regarding the importance of stories of pain and suffering told by others, e. g., testimonies (cf. Scarry: *The Body in Pain* [note 4], pp. 3–7). For a criticism of the idea of the privacy of pain, especially as it appears in Scarry's discussion, cf. Talal Asad: *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford (Stanford University Press) 2003, pp. 79–85.

12 In this context, see also another text written by Benjamin in 1936: »The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov« (SW III, 143–166; GS II, 438–465). Due to the restricted scope of this essay, I will not be able to discuss this text here.

This accentuation of the story's movement, the stream of the speaking voice whose healing power is revealed to be immeasurably stronger than any possible content, echoes a short fragment Benjamin wrote some ten years earlier in his *One-Way Street* (»Si Parla Italiano«, SW I, 480; GS IV, 137–138). There he recalls himself sitting at night on a street bench, tormented by violent pains (»heftige Schmerzen«). Opposite him, on another bench, two girls sat down and started speaking Italian, a language that he did not understand. In the depths of his pain, he hears only the foreign sounds of the whispering girls' voices. Although they did not address him, and he could not have understood them even if they had, Benjamin recounts: »I could not resist the feeling, in face of this unmotivated whispering in a language inaccessible to me, that a cool dressing was being applied to the painful place (SW I, 480; »Nun konnte ich bei diesem unmotivierten Flüstern in einer mir unzugänglichen Sprache mich des Gefühls nicht erwehren, es lege sich um die schmerzende Stelle ein kühler Verband«, GS IV, 137–138).

Pain's relief appears in this text as being explicitly connected to Benjamin's hearkening to a foreign language, to a linguistic expression whose incomprehensible content is essentially inaccessible to him. The relief is depicted here as a »cool dressing,« an almost identical formulation to what appears in Benjamin's *Anmerkungen* to the *Denkbilder*, where he depicts N.'s wife's healing power as being »schmerzstillenden.« In the *One-Way Street* fragment, the cool dressing is linked to the *sound* of the two girls' voices, and to it alone. Language here does not communicate any form of content, instead, it possesses a special healing power. In the same way, the mother's voice and touch heals *regardless* of the content of the story she tells.[13]

Pain as *Staudamm*

However, what seems to be a description of a harmonious configuration among sickness, care, and storytelling is not that simple. In both the *Kindheit* and the *Denkbilder*, we find not only the similar water metaphors used to refer to the vigorous flow of the narrative, but also another corresponding image: that of the

13 It is important to notice that the three fragments I discuss here (»The Fever,« »Storytelling and Healing« and »Si Parla Italiano«) reveal a clear correspondence between healing and the female figure. It is therefore not only the voice telling the story, the hands' touch or the soft whisper that are important for the understanding of healing. It is also the fact that it is a mother, a wife or two girls who are telling, touching and whispering. On the issue of Gender in Benjamin's writings (not in relation to storytelling or pain) cf. Sigrid Weigel: »Towards a female dialectic of enlightenment: Julia Kristeva and Walter Benjamin,« in: id.: *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, London (Routledge) 1996, pp. 58–73.

Staudamm.[14] The stream of storytelling eventually heals the disease; however, at the story's beginning its currents are not yet strong enough to break the sturdy, solid dam standing in their way. This dam, according to Benjamin, is pain (*Schmerz*).

In the first text he writes: »Pain was a dike that only initially withstood the narration but that later, as the narration gained strength, was undermined and swept into the sea of oblivion« (SW III, 363; »Schmerz war ein Staudamm, welcher der Erzählung nur anfangs widerstand; er wurde später, wenn sie erstarkt war, unterwühlt und in den Abgrund der Vergessenheit gespült«, GS IV, 270); in the second: »If we reflect that pain is a dam that offers resistance [*Widerstand*] to the current of narrative, it is evident that the dam will be pierced when the gradient is steep enough for everything that crosses its path to be swept into an ocean of blissful oblivion« (SW II, 724–725; »Bedenkt man, wie der Schmerz ein Staudamm ist, der der Erzählungsströmung widersteht, so sieht man klar, daß er durchbrochen wird, wo ihr Gefälle stark genug wird, alles, was sie auf diesem Wege trifft, ins Meer glücklicher Vergessenheit zu schwemmen«, GS IV, 430).

In both cases it is pain that blocks, initially, the story's current. Pain stands in storytelling's way, resists it, and maintains its grip on the sick child's body so as to sustain the illness. In the first account we have a quantitative image: the dam is undermined or broken through when storytelling's current becomes strong enough, that is, the more water accumulates, the weaker the dam becomes. There is nothing less than a life-or-death struggle between pain trying to keep its hold on the body, and the caress and soft voice gradually gaining power over it. In the second account, Benjamin adds the image of the gradient or slope (*Gefälle*), which helps the current gather its sweeping strength. In the preparatory notes to this text, Benjamin casts this struggle in a somewhat different way when he not only describes pain as a dam holding up the story's water but adds that pain »locks the lifebloods within it« (trans. I. F.; »die Lebenssäfte absperrt«, GS IV, 1008), and »does not let itself be told« (trans. I. F.; »Schmerz sich nicht erzählen läßt«, GS IV, 1008). Pain actively resists storytelling, specifically, its own story-

14 Cf. Benjamin's 1916 fragment »The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy« for a similar configuration in which a *Staudamm* emerges in the convergence of pain and language. Describing the role and function of language in the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin writes: »midway through its journey nature finds itself betrayed by language, and that powerful blocking of feeling turns to sorrow [...] These plays represent a blocking of nature, as it were an overwhelming damming up of the feelings [...] sorrow fills the sensuous world in which nature and language meet« (SW I, 60, trans. altered; »Wege sieht sich die Natur von Sprache verraten und jene ungeheure Hemmung des Gefühls wird Trauer [...] Sie stellen die Hemmung der Natur dar, gleichsam eine ungeheure Stauung des Gefühls [...] Trauer erfüllt die sinnliche Welt, in der Natur und Sprache sich begegnen«, GS II, 138–139). For a discussion of this text, cf. Ferber: *Philosophy and Melancholy* [note 6] pp. 141–152.

telling. It wards off any attempt to put it into words, to express it. For expression, as the German word *Ausdruck* suggests, will push pain outside the body.

The conception of pain as a *Staudamm* marks an interesting point of comparison between Benjamin and Freud. Although he mentions several times that pain is an insufficiently understood phenomenon (»We know very little about pain [...]«),[15] Freud repeatedly attempts to give an account of it, frequently using metaphors of overflow and broken-down barriers when he describes pain. In his early texts he characterizes pain in terms of an increase of cathexis and singles it out as a phenomena that collapses boundaries, which cannot contain the large build-up of energy that inevitably punctures any protective shields;[16] and describes pain as an »internal hemorrhage,« an expression emphasizing the excessiveness inherent to pain's accumulation.[17] A corresponding phraseology can be found in his 1920 »Beyond the Pleasure Principle,« where he writes that

> there is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus, and another problem arises instead – the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can then be disposed of.[18]

The similarities between Freud and Benjamin become even more intriguing if we compare the Benjaminian relation between pain and storytelling with Freud's account of the pain and the »talking cure.« A lot can be said about such a comparison, but let me just state one important point here. For Freud, the success of the talking therapy lies in the patient's ability to put into words the events that called forth his symptoms. Freud and Breuer describe what will later be known as the »talking cure« [*Redekur*] (a name given to this method by Freud's and Breuer's patient, Anna O.) as follows:

> *Each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it*

15 Sigmund Freud: »Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety«, in: James Strachey (ed./trans.): *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London (Hogarth Press) 1957–1966, vol. 20 (hereafter *SE*), p. 170.

16 Id.: »Project for a Scientific Psychology«, *SE* I, pp. 306–321.

17 Id: »Draft G: Melancholia«, Extracts from the Fliess Papers, *SE* I, pp. 205–206.

18 Id.: »Beyond the Pleasure Principle«, *SE* 18: 29–31. Among Freud's other accounts of pain, cf. especially: »Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety«, *SE* XX, pp. 75–176 (particularly Addenda C to the text: pp. 170–172). See also, Ilit Ferber: »Aphasie, Trauma und Freuds schmerzlose Wunde«, in: Christine Kirchhoff/Gerhard Scharbert (eds.): *Freuds Referenzen*, Berlin (Kulturverlag Kadmos) 2012, pp. 145–167.

was provoked, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words.[19]

The unspoken, wordless symptoms give rise to pain (the mental and the physical substrate in many of Freud's cases); putting into words the event that brought about these symptoms is the key to relief. In what would later become part of Freud's famous therapeutic method, speaking about the source of the symptoms, telling their story or history, would eventually replace the appearance of the symptoms themselves. As soon as the symptom's origin was put into words, the symptom itself completely disappeared in the patient. For this reason, Breuer and Freud emphasize that the most important factor determining pain's relief would be the question »whether there has been an energetic reaction to the event that provokes an affect« – reaction here meaning different forms of discharge. In this context, the authors also point to the daily linguistic use of phrases such as »to cry oneself out« (»sich ausweinen«) or »to blow off steam« (»sich austoben«).[20]

In Freud's case, the content of the patient's story works to mitigate the painful symptoms, whereas for Benjamin – as the texts discussed show – what matters is not the content of the story but the way it is told. The mother's loving voice, the wife's soothing hands that themselves »tell the story,« the girls' whispering in a foreign language – all point at one and the same structure: pain is healed by language, but not just by any type of language. The language spoken by the mother sitting at her child's bed shatters the symbolic dimension of language and opens it up to the semiotic facets of expression:[21] not to the content of the story

19 Josef Breuer/Sigmund Freud: »On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena. Preliminary Communication«, *SE* II, p. 6, italics in original.

20 »The case of Fräulein Elisabeth von R« is another startling example for the examination of the relation between pain and language: »[Elisabeth von R's] painful legs began to ›join in the conversation‹ during our analyses. What I have in mind is the following remarkable fact. As a rule the patient was free from pain when we started work. If, then, by a question or by pressure upon her head I called up a memory, a sensation of pain would make its first appearance, and this was usually so sharp that the patient would give a start and put her hand to the painful spot. The pain that was thus aroused would persist so long as she was under the influence of the memory; it would reach its climax when she was in the act of telling me the essential and decisive part of what she had to communicate, and with the last word of this it would disappear. I came in time to use such pains as a compass to guide me; if she stopped talking but admitted that she still had a pain, I knew that she had not told me everything, and insisted on her continuing her story till the pain had been talked away. Not until then did I arouse a fresh memory« (Freud: *SE* II, pp. 148–149). For a discussion of the idea of the »talking cure« in Freud and Breuer as well as an interesting account of the role »origin« plays in their therapeutic theory, cf. Andrew Benjamin: »The Overflow of Words: From Breuer to Freud«, in: *New Formations* 5 (1988), pp. 120–132.

21 I am alluding to Julia Kristeva's discussion of the terms »symbolic« and »semiotic.« Cf. Julia Kristeva: *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, New York (Columbia University Press) 1984, pp. 19–106.

but to its movement. The story therefore heals with the sound of the voice and not with what it says. Glancing back at Anna O.'s story, it is interesting that what she finds soothing, in one of the famous essay's sections, is her own utterance of childhood rhymes in a language that was not her mother tongue (English). There she takes comfort in a child's language of rhymes and repetitions, a language whose semantic content is so much less effective than the comfort of its repetitive reiterations, its monotonous sounds. Returning to Benjamin, it is only such an expression of linguistic rhythm or pulse, of the music of language spoken or sung by the loving voice that has the vigorous force to break down pain's grip on the body.

Conclusion

Looking back at the *Kindheit* and the *Denkbilder* so as to set out Benjamin's views on pain, several distinct characteristics stand out. When he speaks about pain, Benjamin markedly does not focus on the question of pain's grounds, cause, or origin. The illness simply appears and pain suddenly strikes – the question of the source becomes irrelevant, or at least completely neutral. Instead, Benjamin is concerned with the phenomenology of the experience of pain itself, its movement within the tormented body and the intensity of its flow. This corresponds to what Benjamin terms the »metaphysical difference« between pain and pleasure: whereas pleasure is intermittent, pain is permanent; while what is at stake for pleasure is its source, in the case of pain it is only its destination or purpose that matters; and whereas pleasure is inherently not capable of any form of enhancement, pain gathers its strength as it intensifies while flowing thorough the suffering body (GS VI, 83; SW I, 397).

However, Benjamin's understanding of pain's movement, its flow throughout the pain-ridden body, is always coupled with a consideration of the question of expression. This indicates that even though the relationship between pain and linguistic expression seems at first to be contradictory, for Benjamin pain's self-definition is inherently dependent upon the establishment of its relation to expression. In the beginning pain actively resists storytelling. Pain fights the tenderness of words, the soothing loving touch of the caressing hands and their efforts to dissolve pain, conflating it into the movement of the story. It is in this sense that Benjamin describes pain as a dam in both the *Denkbilder* and the *Kindheit*. Pain clearly struggles against language and against the process in which language gradually consolidates and gains strength over it. In Benjamin's conceptualization of pain, relief or healing is achieved when language has the upper hand, when its flow is powerful enough to tear down the opaque, blocked inexpressibility of pain.

This impenetrability of pain is cited in Benjamin's early notes to the *Denkbilder*, in which he writes that pain obstructs the possibility of a story, its own story, thereby clogging the course of the stream (GS IV, 1008). In this image, pain is fighting for its life, because the moment it weakens in the face of language, it will immediately be dissolved by the story, into words that the stream will carry into the »sea of oblivion.« (And as Benjamin writes elsewhere, »pain cannot be forgotten.«[22]) To put it plainly, pain can leave the body's confines only insofar as it is put into words; this is the reason why pain resists language so forcefully: because surrendering to it would mean nothing less than its utter disintegration. For Benjamin, pain manifests most evidently an essential stoppage and interruption, a disturbance in the continuous, constant rhythm of the story.

However, Benjamin is not merely staging an opposition here between pain and language; he argues for something much more far-reaching: pain's vigorous struggle against language via its forceful grip upon the body, – is simultaneously the condition of possibility for the very existence of the story. The damming effected by pain conditions the accumulation of the story's force, the very gathering of momentum that enables the story, finally, to tear down pain's hold upon the body. Without pain's struggle against it, there would be no story, no language. But there is a mutual interdependence here: pain is also determined by language since its struggle against it allows pain to hold on, all the more tightly, to the physically wracked human body in which pain finds its preeminent instrument of realization, its most consummate fulfillment.

22 In »Ibiza Sequence« Benjamin writes: »In dreams there is no astonishment and in pain there is no forgetting, because both bear their opposites within them, just as in a calm the peaks and troughs of the waves lie merged in one another« (SW II, 592, »Habit and Attentiveness«; »Im Traum kein Staunen und im Schmerz kein Vergessen, weil beide ihren Gegensatz schon in sich tragen, wie Wellenberg und Wellental bei Windstille ineinander gebettet liegen«, GS IV, 407–408.