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## Benjamin's modernity

Any argument that starts with the claim that it concerns a theory of modernity is constrained to account for the nature of modernity's inception. Even in working with the assumption of modernity's presence there would still have to be a description of that which was located in its differentiation from the modern. Part of the argument to be developed here is that for the major thinkers of modernity its occurrence is thought in terms of a break or an interruption. Here, the particular project is to locate that thinking in the writings of Walter Benjamin. A context therefore is set by those writings and the presence within them of attempts to develop a relationship between modernity and its necessary interarticulation with a philosophical conception of historical time. Given this context, the opening question has to concern the specificity of interruption within those writings.

How is interruption to be thought? What is the conception of interruption at work within Benjamin's writings? Although it appears as a motif in his engagement with Romanticism and is then repositioned – if not reworked in the later writings in terms of a thinking of historical time – interruption as a mode of thought within Benjamin's work can be identified under a number of different headings. In each instance what insists is the question of what interruption stages. In Benjamin, as will become clear, interruption is the term through which a theory of modernity can be thought. This is not to argue that it is identical with the conception of modernity located in Benjamin's writings as such. Rather, it is modernity as an interruption, one that has to be maintained and which will vanish within the resurgence of historicism understood as the insistence of continuity in the face of discontinuity, that marks the move from a specifically Romantic motif to a thinking of historical time. The Romantic motif of interruption will allow for such a thinking of historical time. The direct consequence of this is that to the extent that this latter point is the case then a theory of modernity will owe as much to a Romantic heritage as it will to one coming from the Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it can be further argued that thinking the particularity of modernity

as an interruption depends upon the successful distancing of the conception of historical time within the Enlightenment tradition.

Interruption is named in different ways. Perhaps the most emphatic, and the one that will allow this theme to be traced here, is the "caesura." The aim of this chapter is to develop an understanding of interruption both in terms of the "caesura," and to note the effective presence of this specific mode of thought within a number of different texts. Often interruption will be named differently. Rather than attempt a synoptic exercise, two particular moments will be taken up. The first concerns the work of the caesura in Benjamin's essay "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" and the second is the recurrence of the term in Convolute N of the *Arcades Project* (*Arcades*, 475; N10A, 3). In regard to Benjamin's own chronology these texts mark the beginning and the end of his writing career. While Benjamin writes both his doctoral dissertation and his essay on Hölderlin prior to the Goethe essay, the latter can be seen as the point of departure both for his development of the concept of criticism developed in the dissertation and his sustained engagement with the Romantic heritage. The *Arcades Project*, while not finished in a literal sense, always brought with it the possibility of never being finished. As such it was the work that truly marked the end of Benjamin's writings.

Almost at the end of Benjamin's extraordinary study of Goethe's novel, he writes that a particular sentence contains what he describes as the "caesura of the work." Analyzing this claim will open up the way the caesura is staged in his early writings. The passage in question is the following:

In the symbol of the star, the hope that Goethe had to conceive for the lovers had once appeared to him. That sentence, which so to speak with Hölderlin contains the caesura of the work and in which, while the embracing lovers seal their fate, everything pauses, reads: "Hope shot across the sky above their heads like a falling star." They are unaware of it, of course . . .

("Goethe," *SW I*, 354–55)

The presence of the star cannot be divorced from its presence as a symbol. The text is clear, "*Denn unter dem Symbol des Sterns*" ("In the symbol of a star"). Introduced with the symbol is the split that works within the caesura and which is registered in the lover's non-registration of the star – as the symbol of hope. Understanding that split means paying attention to the complex relationship between time and the Absolute as it figures in the symbol insofar as the symbol is evidenced in this passage. (At this stage in Benjamin's development he is yet to formulate a sustained distinction between symbol and allegory.) Benjamin has allowed here for a conception

of the symbol that departs both from the simultaneity of the relation between symbol and the symbolized, and equally from the hermeneutic demands of surface/depth as the setup through which the symbol is constrained to be interpreted. The opening up of the symbol occurs within what could be described as a destruction entailing ontological and temporal considerations. Destruction figures in the Goethe essay in a number of different places. One of the more significant is in terms of the "torso."

Benjamin refers both in the Goethe essay and in the doctoral dissertation to the "torso." In the case of the dissertation the term is used to argue that the particular "can never coalesce with the Ideal" but has to remain "*als Vorbild*" ("as a prototype"). In the Goethe essay the symbol is also linked to the "torso." It is presented in relation to the work of "the expressionless." Benjamin writes: "Only the expressionless completes the work by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into a torso of a symbol" ("Goethe," *SW I*, 340). What is a "torso of a symbol"? The first part of the answer to this question is that it is a result; the consequence of the work of the "expressionless." The work is completed in its being fragmented. The mistake would be to read this as a literal claim. There are not any shards; there will not have been any fragments. Rather that moment (and it is a moment, Benjamin writes *in einem Augenblick*) is that in which the most severe form of irreconcilability occurs. The torso of a symbol, however, is not given within the structure of necessity demanded by diremption since it does not envisage its own overcoming or resolution. Rather, it is the staging of an opening that can only ever be maintained as this opening. Being maintained in this manner it defines a predicament in which the problem of closure and thus resolution is staged without an end being envisaged.

What then of the "torso" in this predicament? As a torso the symbol has been stripped of the structure and thus of the possibility of temporal simultaneity: nonetheless this cannot be interpreted as opening up a field of infinite deferral. The work is still completed. The expressionless completes. Again the text is clear, Benjamin states, "*vollendet das Werk*" ("completes the work"). It is completed by the occurrence within it that is the work of a temporal register that cannot be assimilated to the temporality of expression. This means that what completes the work is integral to the work's formal presence and not to the "content" of its narrative. The "expressionless" is not the interruption of continuity nor is it simple discontinuity. It completes the work by showing, on the one hand, the perpetual vacuity of expression if expression were thought to voice the all, and, on the other, by demanding of the work that it recall – recall within and as its work – its separation from the eternal. While more needs to be said, the introduction of time allows the

problem of the nature of the caesura, and in this context its relation to hope, to be staged. In the passage already noted the caesura enters with a particular purpose. The expressionless understood as “a category of language and art” – though not of a work or genre – “can be no more rigorously defined than through a passage from Hölderlin’s ‘Remarks on Oedipus’” (“Goethe” *SW I*, 340) to which Benjamin adds that the deployment of the caesura beyond its use in a theory of tragedy has not been noticed, let alone pursued with adequate rigor.

Two points therefore. The first is that the caesura allows for a rigorous definition of the expressionless. Secondly, the caesura is to be used other than in its employment within a theory of tragedy. The caesura is precisely not an emblem of rhetoric. On one level the caesura and the expressionless are different names for the same possibility, namely an interruption that yields completion. It is this possibility that needs to be pursued by a return to the passage in which the completion of Goethe’s novel is identified as occurring in a single sentence. How could it be that a sentence might “contain the caesura of the work”? What is shattered in this case? Where are the shards? Here there are no twitching limbs vainly gesturing at what remains, i.e., to the torso. How then is this claim to be understood? Moreover, the passage in which this phrase – “which will complete the work” – is presented, does not occur at its completion. It may set the seal for what will occur, and yet it occurs pages from the end. How then does it work to complete the work? For Benjamin this has to be the question proper to criticism if only because the answer would “provide detailed knowledge of the work.”

It is essential therefore to return to one of Benjamin’s formulations of criticism. Only with an understanding of criticism will it become possible to follow the role attributed to the caesura in the Goethe essay. The essay is, after all, a work of “criticism.” The passage in question moves criticism through a number of vital stages. While the passage is detailed – containing in addition an important reference to Schlegel’s own criticism of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* – its detail is essential:

The legitimization of criticism – which is not to posit criticism as an objective court of judgment on all poetic production – consists in its prosaic nature. Criticism is the preparation of the prosaic kernel in every work. In this, the concept preparation is understood in the chemical sense, as the generation of a substance through a determinate procedure to which other substances are submitted. This is what Schlegel means when he says of *Wilhelm Meister*: “the work not only judges itself it prepares itself.” The prosaic is grasped by criticism in both of its meanings: in its literal meaning through the form of expression, as criticism expresses itself in prose; in its figurative meaning through criticism’s

object, which is the eternal sober continuance of the work. This criticism, as process and as product, is a necessary function of the classical work.

(*Concept of Criticism*, *SW I*, 153)

Criticism is that approach to the work in which the identification of its particularity allows for its incorporation into what Romanticism would have identified as “the realm of the Absolute.” The move, in the most direct sense, would be from the “prosaic kernel” to the prose of criticism. The extent to which a work is criticizable is the extent to which it prepares itself (is prepared) for this possibility. The complicating factor in the passage is how the distinction between the “literal” and the “figural” is to be understood. For Benjamin “prosaic” has two meanings. The first refers to its presence defined within the context of the passage as “unmetrical language.” The prosaic expressed in the prose of criticism. However, the prosaic is also “grasped by criticism in a figurative sense” as “the eternal continuation of the work.” What that means is that criticism holds to particularity while, at the same time, allowing for the particular’s absorption into the Absolute.

Criticism is able to allow for the completion of the particular work to the extent that the work is criticizable. As it is formulated in the Goethe essay this signals the presence of the possibility of showing “in the work of art the virtual possibility of formulating the work’s truth content” as the “highest philosophical problem.” The latter is, of course, the staging of the Absolute and its impossible possibility. The moment that brings this together is the caesura. As has already been intimated, the first reference in Benjamin’s text to this term that is worth noting concerns his identification of the caesura as it figures in Hölderlin’s *Remarks*. It is important to return to the actual text he cites. The Hölderlin text, as cited by Benjamin is as follows:

For the tragic transport is the actually empty and the least restrained. – Thereby in the rhythmic sequence of the representations wherein the transport presents itself, there becomes necessary what in the poetic metre is called caesura, the pure world, the counter rhythmic rupture – namely, in order to meet the onrushing change of representations at its highest point, in such a manner that not the change of representation but the representation itself soon appears.

(“Goethe,” *SW I*, 340–1)

Hölderlin’s formulation is more complex than suggesting a form of interruption that would only ever be a counter-rhythm. Metre does not measure the interruption. That would make the caesura a literal breaking apart. Rather, such a rupture must take place on the level of representation and presentation. The site of interruption is the “sequence of the representations” and their movement is that of the “onrushing change of representations.”

The sequence and the movement produce the site of interruption. This sequence cannot be straightforwardly conflated with plot. Sequence and movement need to be viewed in temporal terms. They involve a particular form of unfolding; one which articulates a sequential temporality. The caesura is positioned by place – insofar as it can be located – while it is not the work of place. Thus, it is not another occurrence. The complicating factor here is that interruption is both the interruption of a certain temporal sequence, and equally the interruption of the possibility of reading that sequence as the unfolding of the purely transcendental. In other words, the work is neither regulated nor caused by that which is external to it. The former element is the one that comes to dominate Benjamin's later writings. Nonetheless, the other element is important as what is refused by it is the possibility of an eternal other, either as God, idea, or myth, to provide the artwork with its legitimacy and, though this is probably to reiterate the impossibility of legitimacy, to offer the locus and thus determine the nature of critique. Critique is not a relation between an external element and internal components that causes these components to receive a specific determination.

What remains elusive in this presentation of the caesura – and here it cannot be restricted to the caesura since it involves the other forms of interruption – is how such an event can “give free reign to an expressionless power inside all artistic media.” The answer to this question is there in the almost possible object of attainment identified by the use of the term “sobriety.” It marks the point of connection between measure and the measureless. As such it is the return of the problem of particularity. This time, however, it is posed in a different way. Rather than the particular, it is the Absolute that has centrality. Absolute here is marked by an impossible possibility. At the same time it is also generative. However, despite being productive, the Absolute cannot be produced. It can be neither made nor shown. Read back though the caesura – and while not wishing, again, to conflate them – it marks the interruption that yields an artwork. It presents that which is proper to art. This is the “expressionless power inside all artistic media”; i.e., the Absolute. The Absolute, the nature of its presence, already turning within semblance cannot be reduced to that to which “mere semblance” gestures.

How is semblance to be delimited? In a discussion of “Goethean figures” and thus as an integral part of the work's critique, Benjamin, drawing on the critical apparatus he had already established, writes of those figures:

[They] can appear to be not created or purely constructed but conjured. Precisely from this stems the kind of obscurity that is foreign to works of art and that can be fathomed only by someone who recognizes its essence in

semblance. For semblance in this poetic work is not so much represented as it is in the poetic representation itself. It is only for this reason that the semblance can mean so much; and only for this reason that the representation means so much.  
 (“Goethe,” *SW I*, 345)

At work in this formulation is that which arises from the operation of critique. In the first instance, there is an appearance of figures having one source rather than another. Here, again, the detail is necessary. The formulation is precise. Goethean figures “can appear” to have arisen through an act of conjuring and if that were then the case the critique of conjuring as “having nothing in common” (“Goethe,” *SW I*, 340) with the generation of art would have been rendered otiose. The problem of this appearing is the problem inherent in the work. Its presence attests to the necessity of critique, and thus to critique as an activity done in relation to a work that sanctions it. Rather than taking what appears as appearance, in the end mere appearance, the reverse situation needs to occur. There has to be the recognition of what is essential to art in the semblance; the “Wesen” in the “Schein.” With the *Elective Affinities*, and it should be noted that Benjamin specifies that, in this work, there is not a “presentation of semblance,” it is the presentation itself. This is the reason why semblance can have the meaning that it does and, reciprocally, this is why the presentation itself is imbued with such meaning. Again, it is essential to see what is being distanced. Not only is there a sustained refusal to interpret appearance as representational and therefore as standing for something other than itself, there is also a distancing of the possibility that semblance acts out what it can only gesture at in action without being such an action.

Understanding the import of this claim concerning the presence of semblance depends upon accepting Benjamin's identification of the two elements that determine the interpretation. The first is that “the subject of *The Elective Affinities* is not marriage,” and the second is that “belief in Ottilie's beauty is the fundamental condition for engagement with the novel” (“Goethe,” *SW I*, 338). This is not “the appearance of the beautiful,” rather it is the “semblance-like beauty” that is central. This shift has to be recognized as a move from content to truth, that is, from a concern with the “material content” to a concern with “truth content.” It is not as though marriage and the concerns of bourgeois gentility are absent. Rather they only figure within the work of truth. Before pursuing this move to semblance and thus to the complexity surrounding semblance, it is essential to note that the emergence of beauty occurs as part of the process of critique. Underlining the importance of this shift is not, therefore, a mere passing remark. It delineates how Benjamin's essay is also a work of critique.

Once critique is linked to an engagement with truth rather than content, then content has to be repositioned in relation to truth. The detail of Benjamin's engagement with the constitutive elements of the novel is, though only in this instance, not necessary. What has to be retained however is the direction of that engagement. Benjamin's move is to reposition semblance and thus give it its full philosophical force. Semblance opens up the realm of the Absolute and the relationship between the particular and the Absolute once it is understood that semblance stages both itself and the Absolute. (The presence of the latter is to be thought in terms of the impossible possibility of the Absolute's presence.) Precision is essential here. Benjamin's claim is that critique works within the opening between particular and Absolute. It needs both elements – particular/Absolute – since the interrelationship of these elements comprises the work of art. This is why in regard to the treatment of beauty in Goethe's novel, in which beauty becomes "the object in its veil," Benjamin will write that:

The task of criticism is not to lift the veil but rather, through the most precise knowledge of it as a veil, to raise itself for the first time to the true view of the beautiful. To the view that will never open itself up to so-called empathy and will only imperfectly open itself to a purer contemplation of the naive: to the view of the beautiful of that which is secret. Never yet has a true work of art been grasped other than when it ineluctably represented itself as a secret.

("Goethe," *SW I*, 351)

The opening line contains the key to this passage. There would seem to be a twofold possibility. The first links criticism to the process of revelation and thus the uncovering of an inner truth. This is precluded since criticism is not concerned with lifting the veil. In the same way a fetishism of the veil generating an interpretive mysticism would still attribute to the veil the quality of harboring depth. This would imply that the veil is literally the veil. Both these possibilities are curtailed since criticism is already informed. Benjamin is clear: the veil is known. It is an object of knowledge. Intuition or empathy would fail to interrupt the work of the infinite. Knowledge rehearses the petrification of the object: the object of knowledge. Knowledge does not provide access to the secret. Knowledge is knowledge of the artwork as the secret. Knowledge maintains the secret, though as known. The limit is established by the effective nature of the Absolute. While accounting for presence – and allowing for its present incorporation as part of the particular's presence – it can never be present as itself.

If there is a way of generalizing what is at work in the complex relationship between interruption and criticism, then it can be captured in the claim

that what the caesura allows is the relationship between the particular and the Absolute to be thought. In doing this the artful nature of the artwork is presented. Criticism in the context cannot be thought other than in its relationship to the work of the Absolute. The complex presence of the Absolute and the way it figures within, if not providing the very ground of, Benjamin's engagement with Early Romanticism, opens up the move to his later concerns with history. That concern is not with the detail of history – Rankean "facts" – but with the temporality that such facts display and within which such facts are able to be displayed. History cannot be thought other than as a philosophy of time.

In moving from a concern with criticism to the concerns of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* the difficulty any commentator faces is how to account for the repositioning. Perhaps the key interpretive question is: is there a retention of the Romantic conception of the Absolute? (In sum, a conception in which a particular work is both itself and the Absolute at the same time.) Prior to any attempt to answer this question, what has to be addressed is the move from interruption in the writings directly concerned with Romanticism to a more generalized sense of interruption. Prior to turning to the passage from the *Arcades Project* in which the term "caesura" figures, two specific formulations of interruption need to be noted. The first comes from "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" and the second from "On the Concept of History."

As a text, Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" is full of remarkable moments, shock insights that attest to the interruption that yields the work of art within modernity. One of the most emphatic occurs in the following passage:

Let us assume that an actor is supposed to be startled by a knock at the door. If his reaction is not satisfactory, the director can resort to an expedient: he could have a shot fired without warning behind the actor's back on some other occasion when he happens to be in the studio. The actor's frightened reaction at that moment could be recorded and then edited into the film. Nothing shows more graphically that art has escaped the realm of the "beautiful semblance" which for so long was regarded as the only sphere in which it could thrive.

(*SW IV*, 261)

What is this "beautiful semblance" where art was thought to "thrive," and in which it can "thrive" no longer? What type of change has occurred such that this dislocation and thus subsequent relocation comes to pass? The reference made in this 1936 text is both to the Early Romantics (and thus to Benjamin's own engagement with that heritage) and to a sustained engagement with the

topic of beauty that reappears throughout his work. A significant instance of that engagement is the long footnote on beauty in the essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (SW IV, 352). This footnote signals a historicization of beauty that was not as evident in his earlier writings. As has already been intimated, the most sustained discussion of beauty as "beautiful semblance" appears in the final section of his essay "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*." In the final pages of that text Benjamin introduces – perhaps reintroduces – the task of criticism in relation to beauty. This relation is central. All of Benjamin's work on art has been concerned with detailing the task of criticism. Criticism is the key to the doctoral dissertation. Indeed the complex relationship between philosophy and criticism is evident in the opening line of the Preface to *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (*Origin*, 27–56). In the published version there is an important modification of the earlier drafts. The change introduces the problem of philosophical style by inscribing the problem of presentation into the presentation of philosophy itself. The first passage is from the draft and the second is from the published version.

Es ist der philosophischen Erkenntnis eigen, mit jeder Wendung von neuem vor der Frage der Darstellung zu stehen.  
[It is characteristic of philosophical knowledge that it must continually confront the question of presentation.] (GS, III, 840)

Es ist der philosophischen Schrifttum eigen, mit jeder Wendung von neuem vor der Frage der Darstellung zu stehen.  
[It is characteristic of philosophical *writing* that it must continually confront the question of presentation.] (*Origin*, 28; emphasis mine)

While the shift from knowledge to writing is of great significance in terms of the development of Benjamin's text, what is interesting for these concerns is that writing becomes a practice stemming from a particular formulation of philosophical activity. The initial use of the term "knowledge" (*Erkenntnis*) creates the link to criticism, for it is at the end of the Goethe essay that criticism and knowledge are interconnected. What is important in the move from Benjamin's early texts to the later ones is that the conception of art is inextricably bound up with the task of criticism once criticism is defined in relation to knowledge. A shift in the nature of art enjoins a concomitant shift in the activity of criticism and thus of the philosophy of art. While that shift occurs, what is not lost is the link to knowledge.

Does this mean, however, that the shift from the "realm of beautiful semblance" detailed in the passage cited above is at the same time a move away from a thinking of art conditioned by the Absolute? Drawing such a conclusion would be too hasty. Clearly, what Benjamin can be interpreted as

suggesting is not that the Absolute no longer figures in how the work of art is to be understood, but that the locus of art and thus what counts as art's work has changed. The move from the identification of art with poetry – or at least if not with poetry then with literature in the broadest sense of the term – and thus the capacity to generalize about art based on that identification, has ceded its place to a definition of art in terms of what produces it. In regard to the work of art, what is occurring can be reformulated as a move from *poesis* to *technē*. Even in allowing for this reformulation the question that returns is the extent to which such a move rids itself of the Absolute. And yet this question cannot be posed as though the answer were all or nothing. It is more likely the case that in the move from one to the other – *poesis* to *technē* – the Absolute rather than vanishing comes to be redefined. While art will continue to be defined via the activity of criticism, understood either implicitly or explicitly, in relation to the Absolute, the shift of the content of that definition will yield a differing understanding of the Absolute.<sup>2</sup>

As a generalization, the contrast is between two different possibilities for art and criticism. The nature of that difference is to be understood in terms of the relationship between time and the object. *Poesis* involves a different relationship than the one at work in art defined as *technē*. Indeed, it is because the relationship is formulated in this way that the temporal considerations at work in the latter – the conception of the work of art determined by *technē* – are such that they open up as historical concerns; not the concerns of history as such but in terms of the temporality proper to that conception of history that is constrained to undo the identification of history with the temporality of historicism. (The latter being the temporality of continuity that is sustained either in terms of simple chronology or in terms of the endurance through time of concepts – for example: beauty, genius – that are taken never to change.) Both the need for, as well as another sense of interruption, occur at this precise point. Prior to looking at passages from "On the Concept of History" and the *Arcades Project* in which the conception of interruption figures – and in the case of the latter is identified by the use of the term "caesura" – it is essential to note, if only in passing, the nature of the shift.

What determines Benjamin's initial sense of interruption is the necessity that the activity be internal to the work. The work "prepared" itself to be criticized. There is an extent to which the work has an autotelic nature. The link between the work of the "expressionless" and the activity of criticism – both are involved in differing forms of the work's ruination – is that they are defined in relation to an activity that originates in the place and presence of the Absolute. Once a work can be construed as criticizable

then there is little that stands in the way of the practice of criticism. While it is true that Benjamin has harsh words to say concerning Gundolf's interpretation of Goethe and, while there is a growing awareness of the political nature of criticism, it remains the case that there was no theorization of that which stood in the way of the activity of criticism. In other words, it was not the case in the early writings that there was any recognition of the need for a preliminary move, one which would allow for criticism. Such a move is not preliminary in the sense that it is prior to the activity of criticism. Rather, criticism means dealing both with the way in which a given work of art worked as a work of art while also stripping that work of its insertion into the temporality of continuity – what Benjamin identifies as “historicism” – and thus disrupting the structures that accompanied that hold.

Two points need to be made here. The first is that what the identification of the possibility of inserting, or cutting, a segment into a work – a possibility signaled in the citation from “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” given above – indicates is that there is a shift in how the art object is understood. Part of the change is that the way the work of art works as criticizable changes. The second and related point is that the possibility of the work's absorption into the temporality of continuity is now a possibility that is inherent in the work itself. In the shift from *poesis* to *technē* the work of art does not prepare itself to be identified as something particular. In the move from *poesis* something else takes place. Henceforth, the work of art is always prepared for its absorption into the realm of continuity. As has been indicated, what this means is that the activity of criticism – and perhaps it is possible to go further and argue that this is the task of the progressive critic – necessitates the interruption of that enforcing continuity; an enforcing that is inherent in the technical nature of the object.

Benjamin identifies the problem of historicism – understood as the temporality of sequential continuity – in the following passage from “On the Concept of History.” Of central importance in this passage is the use of the imagery of the rosary beads. It provides a clear example of the way continuity has to be interrupted in order that the potential within and for art be released. Of equal importance is that instead of writing about the critic Benjamin will now write of the “historian.” The passage in question is the following:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a casual connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It becomes historical, posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as

his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.

(III, 263)

A beginning can be made here with the interruption signaled by the use of the rosary. The question has to be – what does it mean to “stop telling the sequence of events”? Here, there is a decisive formulation of interruption. And yet within the formulation what is interrupted has a more complex quality. It is the projection of unity or synthesis – or what Benjamin will identify elsewhere as “universal history” having Kant rather than Hegel in mind – that has to be undone. No longer is this destructive move made in the name of anything other than an intervention within temporal continuity. Precisely because it is an interruption that involves a specific orientation that can be as much philosophical as it is artistic, the demands of that orientation, itself demanding a decision, allow what is taking place here to be described as a politics of time.<sup>3</sup>

Interruption as a figure within Benjamin's writings is linked to the dominance of historicism. Again, this is not a simple concept of the historical and thus of historical time. What takes place within historicism is the naturalization of chronology, on the one hand, and the naturalization of myth, on the other. Working within both is a continuity that effaces the question of whose history is being told or narrated and thus for whom and for what end a given history is being constructed. The act that denaturalizes both myth and chronology is the interruption. The immediate consequence of this interruption is the reconfiguring of the present. With that reconfiguration the present emerges as the “now” – a temporalized and historicized now – that generates the nature of the philosophical and therefore, and at the same time, the political task.<sup>4</sup> What this means is that in Benjamin's later writings a twofold register is added to the locus of interruption. In the case of the earlier work, the locus was the work of art itself. Marking the move is the incorporation of the work of art into a time of the present in which whatever determines the work's specificity can be effaced. Effacing specificity occurs because what marks the work is its capacity to interrupt the time of the present. This interruption occurs as long as the temporality of the present is thought in terms of continuity. What this means, in addition, is that the present is not thought outside its insertion into continuity. This accounts for why Benjamin argues for the urgency of making something a concern for the present. If this does not occur, then the present does no more than form part of the “appearance of permanence” (*Arcades*, 486; NI9, 1).<sup>5</sup> As such

the present is lost from the present. Thinking the present is already an interruption; an interruption yielding the present.

The interruption occurs when the historian stops "telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary." Here, there is a decision that interrupts. This position is made possible by a shift that can be traced from the work of the art defined in terms of "beautiful semblance" to the art work's inescapable connection to reproducibility and thus to technology. The methodological consequences of this interruption redefine how destruction and therefore ruination are to be understood. This other possibility is signaled in the *Arcades Project* as follows: "Historical materialism has to abandon the epic element in history. It blasts the epoch out of the reified 'continuity of history.' It also blasts open the homogeneity of the epoch. It saturates it with ecrasite, i.e. the present (*Gegenwart*)" (*Arcades*, 474; 89a, 6 [trans. modified]). Signaled in this passage is the decision to abandon continuity. That abandoning allows for, and at the same time, is the opening up of the epoch's homogeneity. What is meant by epoch is rescued and transformed in the process. The blasting open allows the fallout to contain the elements of historical work. The position being staged here needs to be run both ways. In the first instance it has to be argued that in the detritus of history – what has been cast out of epic history – there lies the potential to interrupt continuity. Continuity may have been founded on just such an elimination. In the second, it is by blasting apart continuity that what looks to be insignificant, or merely awaits incorporation into a form of continuity or totality, may contain the potential to redefine the present and, more significantly, to have consequences that are potentially as much political as they are philosophical or historical. Occurring in this process is an act of rescue in which images of the past have a capacity to define the present. The rescue is the release – or attempted release – of that potential. In defining it – and again it should be remembered that such an act of definition is the result of a decision – the present comes to be established in contradistinction to the present of continuity. In the formulation of "On the Concept of History," "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (*Ill*, 255). While it is clear that the methodological import of this procedure involves what it is premised on and the different conception of interruption and destruction it involves, what endures as the open question is the relationship all of this has to the Absolute, even if it is a reworked, perhaps even reconfigured, conception of the Absolute. Does this other history of destruction entail the effective presence of the Absolute? This is a question that cannot be ignored.

The passage from the *Arcades Project* that opens up the interruption demanded by the caesura and which will allow for the question of the Absolute

to begin to be posed is the following. It should be remembered that bringing the Absolute into focus is not to add on an extra element. Criticism, as noted already, is unthinkable except in relation to the Absolute. The obvious question is: does this remain the case given the already noted move from the criticism to the historian? Were critics, and therefore criticism, a form of historical materialism *avant la lettre*?

Thinking involves both thoughts in motions and thoughts at rest. When thinking reaches a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions, the dialectical image appears. This image is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its locus is of course not arbitrary. In short it is to be found wherever the tension between dialectical oppositions is greatest. The dialectical image is, accordingly, the very object constructed in the materialist presentation of history. It is identical with the historical object; it justifies its being blasted out of the continuum of the historical process. (*Arcades*, 475; 810a, 3 [trans. modified])

The significance of this passage is twofold. Not only does it reinforce the interconnection between interruption and the historical object, there are also intimations of how a reworked conception of the Absolute can emerge. (These intimations will need to be connected to another passage from the same *Convolute* [460; 82.3] in which the nature of "historical understanding" is redefined in temporal terms.) Despite being interrelated each of these moments needs to be treated in turn.

The "dialectical image" is an interruption. As a dialectical image rather than as a simple image it involves the co-presence of what can neither be reconciled nor rendered synthetic. The image becomes a type of temporal montage and therefore should not be understood within the conventions of the image. Those conventions will always privilege sight over language. The "tensions" inherent in the image are there precisely because of the impossibility of the image's incorporation into the temporality of historicism or into the procession of concepts and activities that are articulated within that temporal unfolding. This image is described as "the caesura in the movement of thought." What does this mean? Any answer to this question has to begin with the recognition that, for Benjamin, the dialectical image is the true historical object. Even though that will be a contested assertion, it is the ineliminability of the conflict that directly confirms the impossibility of withdrawing the historical object from questions concerning for whom, and in whose name, a given history is being formulated. Historicism will always try and incorporate "events" into its own conception of continuity. The caesura is the interruption of that attempt. What that interruption demonstrates is that destruction reconfigures both the historical object and what can count as historical. In the same process, it indicates that continuity (whether it be in



terms of the naturalization of chronology or the incorporation of myth into and as history) is always a secondary effect whose primary intent is the elimination of conflict – even if that elimination is only ever putative. Chronology, myth, and nature would be terms deployed within the desire for what is always the same. The claim here is that not only does the “caesura” overcome that possibility, it also shows the “always the same” to be a politically charged aspiration and not one that contains the truth of time. In other words, the caesura, in overcoming all that which is entailed by continuity, achieves this end by staging the truth of time. It is precisely this staging that opens up the Absolute.<sup>6</sup>

Truth is not being counterposed to appearance. Even though continuity is an appearance and even though the truth of time emerges with the interruption of that appearance, there are two additional points that need to be noted. The first is that the move from *poesis* to *technē* allows for the presentation of time in this way since reproducibility is already implicated in the reconfiguring of time. Second, the reason why there is no straightforward opposition between truth and appearance is that there is no presentation of truth that has the same status as any given narrative of continuity. There is no narrative of truth. There are only moments of interruption. These moments are fleeting; appearing and disappearing as sites of philosophical and political activity.

There will be no final summation. And this lack of finality is not the identification of the Absolute with a domain of unfettered freedom. How then, in this context, will the Absolute figure?

The answer to this question should now be clear. The Absolute is time. Neither chronological time nor clock time, the Absolute is given within the interruption in which the truth of time is presented. Interruption is only possible because what can be known and therefore what functions as the ground of what can be known are not identical with what appears. Knowing what appears, allowing it to be reconfigured as an object of knowledge, necessitates understanding appearance as an effect. There is the inevitability of interruption. It is connected to the way Benjamin defines “historical understanding” as what is “to be viewed primarily as an afterlife (*Nachleben*) of that which has been understood: and so what came to be recognized about works through the analysis of their after life, their fame, should be considered the foundation of history itself” (*Arcades*, 460; N2, 3). The point being made here is a redefinition of history. Within that redefinition history becomes the continuity of the reworking of what is already there. This reworking is occasioned by the interruption of the given. With that interruption what is given comes to be given again and in so doing has an “afterlife.” It is, of course,

never given again as the “same.” This is a process without conclusion. Or at least it is a process whose conclusions are always strategic and provisional. The Absolute is therefore that which allows for the interruption; but equally it is what is evidenced by that interruption. There can be no attempt to present the Absolute, nor even to state the truth of time. The Absolute as time is what allows for the “dialectical image” while precluding any image of time. The absence of the latter is, of course, the moment in which modernity appears as secular.

Interruption as a defining motif in Benjamin's thought dominates both his engagement with Romanticism and his move to the writing of another construction of history. In both instances the interruption – analyzed in this context in terms of the caesura – is unthinkable outside its relation to the Absolute. In regard to Romanticism, the presence of the Absolute is explicable in terms of a retention of key elements of Schlegel's philosophical and critical project.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the *Arcades Project* the Absolute returns as time. Two important conclusions can be drawn from this setup. The first is that it must force a reconsideration of the role of the Absolute within philosophical thinking; even that thinking whose ostensible concern is a theory of modernity. The second is connected insofar as what must be taken up is the extent to which a theory of modernity will depend upon a philosophy of time that has its point of departure in Early Romanticism, rather than in the march of teleological time implicit, for example, in Kant's construal of the relationship between history and the Enlightenment. In sum, interruption will continue to figure since the hold of continuity makes modernity an unfinished project.

## NOTES

1. For an important discussion of Benjamin's work that pays attention to his relationship to Romanticism see Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998).
2. While not defining its presence in relation to the Absolute, Carol Jacobs indicates the extension of “criticism” in her treatment of the relationship between criticism and translation. See *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 286–87.
3. See Peter Osborne, *Politics of Time* (London: Verso, 1997) for an important development of this theme that stems from a consideration of Benjamin's work.
4. I have tried to develop this argument in my *Present Hope* (London: Routledge, 1997).
5. The full quotation is: “It could be that the continuity of tradition is only an appearance. But if this is the case, then it is precisely the persistence of this appearance of permanence that establishes continuity of appearance.”

6. This is a complex and perhaps difficult claim. The argument is, however, straightforward. Forms of continuity rather than being either natural or inevitable are forms of time. Time is given such forms for specific ends. Interrupting such concepts of time works, first to restrict the realization of those ends; second, to show that such concepts are neither natural nor inevitable; and finally to show that time is a site of contestation. The conflict between continuity and discontinuity is the truth of time. Interruption, precisely because it reveals the work of construction, stages time's truth.
7. This position has been worked out in considerable detail in my *Philosophy's Literature* (Manchester: Clinamen, 2001).

## 6

SARAH LEY ROFF

## Benjamin and psychoanalysis

Perhaps without being aware of the fact . . . you find yourself . . . in the most profound agreement with Freud; there is certainly much to be thought about in this connection.

Theodor W. Adorno, Letter to Walter Benjamin, June 1935

Psychoanalysis is a science that attempts to explain normal and pathological states in the human mind, as well as a clinical practice of treatment for the latter. It began with Freud's rejection of hypnosis and shock therapy as cures for hysteria and his development with Josef Breuer of the "talking cure," a technique of analyzing patients' free associations that was to become a central feature of the psychoanalytic session. In Freud's account, psychoanalysis did not truly come into its own until he began to analyze the network of associations that arise in dreams; this was the breakthrough of his first major work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Describing dreams as the "royal road to . . . the unconscious," Freud insisted that their images arise from the interaction between whole systems of repressed thoughts, as a result of which no single meaning can be affixed to any image.

Although this approach may seem reminiscent of the structuralist linguistics emerging around the time Freud was writing, nothing like it had existed before in the realm of dream interpretation. Indeed, while the idea of an unconscious region of the mind that influences our actions most often surprises readers who encounter Freud's work for the first time, it is present in many nineteenth-century theories of psychology which influenced him. The notion that we produce dreams as a result of the struggle between conscious and unconscious wishes is thus less original to Freud than his structural approach to analyzing the relations between them. In psychoanalytic theory, this strategy shifts the relation between form and content from the individual element onto the whole system. This, in turn, suggests an important point of contact between psychoanalysis and early twentieth-century theories of language and literary criticism, in particular Walter Benjamin's.

While Benjamin criticism is an ever-growing field, scholars have only recently begun to pay attention to his relation to Freud or Jung. Ordinarily, the relation between a writer (Benjamin) and a movement (psychoanalysis) would be thought of as a problem of influence. Discussing Benjamin