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SPECIAL ISSUE ON WALTER BENJAMIN

GUEST EDITOR

Rainer Nägele

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Benjamin's Ground.

Rainer Nägele 5

Abstract. Benjamin's reading of Hölderlin in one of his earliest essays already delineates some of the major constellations of his thought. Searching for the ground of language and of poetic language in particular, Benjamin sets out to lay the ground for the possibility of literary criticism. His text enters into a specific relationship with Hölderlin's theory of poetics and poetic language. The movement of this search leads through a metaphoric relationship of "surface" and "depth" toward an ever-receding ground that can be articulated ultimately only in relation to a non-representable abyss (*Abgrund*). A new topography of surface and writing emerges and replaces the surface/depth relationship. Both Hölderlin's poetics and Benjamin's criticism develop a model of representation based on a radical rethinking of writing and script, marked by a "cut" or "caesura" as the precondition of representation and of the possibility of any "thing" represented. In the recurring motif of waking up, Benjamin marks the threshold of that *caesura* and connects it at the same time with a specific trait of modern aesthetics as embodied in Kafka's work. (RN)

Benjamin's Theory of the Lyric.

David E. Wellbery 25

Abstract. The paper reconstructs the argument of Benjamin's early Hölderlin essay, with special emphasis on the notion of *das Gedichtete*. This notion is shown to name a fundamental dissonance between two semiotic modalities, graphics and *Gestalt*. (DEW)

Theories of Knowledge: Fate and Forgetting in the Early Works of Walter Benjamin.

Timothy Bahti. 47

Abstract. Philosophy, and the part of it devoted to epistemology or theories of knowledge, were the site of Walter Benjamin's early training and writing. Simultaneously, he turned toward a critical conception of experience and what he called the linguistic essence of knowledge. This turn manifested itself in a series of writings, all of which focused on ways in which knowledge might emerge from the reading of signs. Knowledge of fate or character, of the future or the present of persons and languages, is embedded within a theory of reading as the noting of signs *qua* signs. Images appear as the signs for such signs, and the problem of reading images becomes the image for a theory of reading. Through readings of selected passages from writings dating from the teens through the early thirties—principally "Fate and Character," "Oneway Street," "On the Image of Proust," and "Berlin Chronicle"—Benjamin's themes of fate and character, remembering and forgetting, are shown to display a fate of reading: the fate at once to see reading, to forget it, and to read this forgetting. (TB)

Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin's Theory of Language.

Rodolphe Gasché. 69

Abstract. Walter Benjamin's writings do not owe their intelligibility to their indebtedness to one or more specific brands of philosophical thought, but to Benjamin's primary concern with the most elementary distinctions of philosophy itself. Chief among these distinctions is that of philosophical thought itself, or the difference it makes with respect to the realms of nature, myth, or the appearances. By focusing on the notions of "communicability" and "translatability," philosophical difference, for Benjamin, shall be shown to rest on structures within the language of man and art that aim at breaking through language's mythical interconnectedness, its weblike quality, its textuality, toward the absolute Other of divine language. Yet, the fundamental philosophical law not to mix genres or realms, as well as the transcending power of philosophical difference, because it remains caught in what it seeks to transgress, are dependent, as far as their success is concerned, on the ultimate justification by the (theological) difference of the absolute Other of divine language. It is, however, not in the power of philosophy to secure all by itself this necessary legitimation. (RG)

Proust and Benjamin: the Invisible Image.

Beryl Schlossman 91

Abstract. Benjamin's essay "Zum Bilde Prousts" questions the status of the image even as it leafs through the possibilities and variations that form it—as photograph, figure, representation, disappearing trace or promise of creation. As the image of Proust's novel, Benjamin's text takes up the elements of *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (poetic language, autobiography, critical commentary) in the terms of Benjamin's theory of allegory reflected through the Proustian strategy of reading and writing. "Zum Bilde Prousts" examines the traditional markers of "art" and "life," locating Proustian *recherche*—and Benjamin's image—in the deep waters beyond them. Through an interpretation of Benjamin's image of Proustian ecstasy (the descent of the mystic) and the images unfolded "Au Temps Perdu" (Benjamin's mystical station of nineteenth-century allegory), Benjamin's essay solicits a new reading of time and eternity, memory and ecstasy. The final illumination of Proust's artful night indicates the decisive turn toward writing at the spot where "Niles of language" come together—the point of convergence of the image and its invisibility. (BS)

Street Talk.

Avital Ronell 105

Abstract. This essay investigates the fragile intersection where rumor and a more "authentic" modality of language can be shown to cross over into one another. Treating the relationship of Benjamin, Heidegger and Rousseau to rumorological paranoia, "Street-Talk" interprets the epistemological teetering between the knowing and not-knowing around which *Fama* articulates her power. All three of these thinkers are shown to be exemplarily afflicted by rumorous utterances and share a drive to create, in their works, a rumor control center. Often these controls take over the features which they attempt to disown; thus the greatest moment of truth-telling appropriates the form of inferential small-talk. The essay analyzes a temporality of writing disclosed by Rousseau's *Promenades* in terms of an *après-ma-mort* structure. Finally, guided by Blanchot's insights and Huet's notion of monsterized publicity, the essay addresses the rapport of rumor to oeuvre: *Ecce Fama*. (AR)

The Word *Wolke*—If It Is One.

Werner Hamacher 133

Abstract. Walter Benjamin's theoretical linguistic considerations of the "Doctrine of Likeness" and the project "On the Mimetic Capacity" were formulated in close—not only close in time—connection with the recording of *Berlin Childhood Around Nineteen Hundred*, to which "Berlin Chronicle" a year earlier, in the Spring of 1932, had served as a prelude. It cannot be doubted that Benjamin's memoirs represent the impetus as well as the explication, extrapolation and fulfillment of the program that his theoretical writings formulate. But the memoirs are, at the same time, its radicalization. And that comes across most clearly when this doctrine of mimesis is condensed in the function of the word *cloud*. For the word *cloud* is just that site in which the divergent elements of Benjamin's text step into the ether of their likeness, as *Worte* steps into *Wolke*. But it becomes this site at the price of likeness with itself. (WH)