“Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form”

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the thought of two philosophers and literary and cultural critics: Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) and Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). Despite the elements of incommensurability that exist between them, I argue that the thought of the one may be brought to revitalize and reilluminate the thought of the other.

Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s thought centres on the problems that arise from a dislocation of the nature of experience from the forms which enable human beings to make sense of that experience. Setting their work in the context of their times and of the philosophical tradition that they inherit, I examine their response to this dislocation through a discussion of their conceptions of habit, tradition, language and art.

Closed forms (epic and monologue, for example, in the case of Bakhtin; the traditional auratic work of art or the Romantic symbol, for example, in the case of Benjamin) provide a completion of experience that fixes experience within the flux of life. Nevertheless, forms such as these, both thinkers conclude, are implicated in social and political hierarchies and result in an objectification of human beings and the world that they inhabit.

The thesis examines Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s development of theories of open forms which challenge completion: dialogue and the novel, in the case of Bakhtin; allegory and montage, in the case of Benjamin. I argue that the two thinkers’ conceptions of such forms promote the preservation of (inter)subjectivity, the dismantling of authoritarian hierarchies and a responsible relationship between the conferring of form and the integrity of experience. Finally, I suggest that Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s promotions of openness might be provisional positions which are predicated on a future completion that will come on either the eschatological or the revolutionary plane.
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‘Whoever wants to make the hard thing give way should miss no opportunity for friendliness.’
Walter Benjamin

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This is no draft. All the errors are mine.
Statement

This thesis is all my own work. Quotations from secondary literature are indicated by reference to the author concerned. Literature used in this dissertation is indicated in the bibliography.

Timothy Beasley-Murray.
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Note on References

All quotations are provided in English. References to most texts by Bakhtin and Voloshinov are to the English translations of their works and are included in parentheses in the text. The following system of abbreviations is used:


Other works by Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle are referred to in the normal fashion.

References to Benjamin are to the German edition of his writings as well as to English translations, except in the few cases where no published translation exists. Most references are also given parentheses in the text and are abbreviated as follows:


Whilst the translations given follow the published versions for the most part, occasionally I have made slight modifications. I indicate where such modifications have taken place.

References to works by other authors are given first in their full form and then, if referred to again, in a shortened form.
Introduction

Oblique Angles
A comparative study of Bakhtin and Benjamin cannot proceed along straight lines. This study does not ignore the elements of incommensurability in a desire to focus on commensurability and comparison. An awareness of elements of incommensurability has led me along a crooked path through Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s thought. This produces images of the two thinkers that diverge fundamentally from the images that one might construct when picturing any one of the thinkers independently. The image of Bakhtin presented here is one of the Bakhtin who appears in conjunction with Benjamin, and is a product of the oblique angle of comparison. The same holds for the image of Benjamin that appears in these pages.

This thesis sets out to show that the oblique angle of comparison highlights aspects of both thinkers that otherwise remain in the shadows. Thus, for example, in Chapter 3 that deals with Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s philosophy of language, a Bakhtinian position on the primacy of intersubjectivity over the fixed antinomy of subject and object has led me to a reading of Benjamin’s conceptions of translation and montage as articulations of an intersubjective relationship between the human subject and the world. Similarly, in the final chapter on totality, a Benjaminian standpoint on the temporal relationship between provisional brokenness and future completion has led me to emphasize the provisional nature of dialogue, rather than what some critics see as its eternal open-endedness. These two interpretations are either absent from the scholarly writing on Bakhtin and Benjamin or exist in under-developed forms. I shall use the second interpretation suggested here (concerning the provisional nature of dialogue in

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1 I am thus in accord with Tihanov’s comments on his own comparison of Bakhtin and Lukács: ‘the comparison of [Bakhtin and Lukács] necessarily presupposed a selective redefinition and reconstitution of the objects of our attention: not Lukács as such, but the Lukács who emerges when placed next to Bakhtin; not Bakhtin on his own, but rather the Bakhtin who becomes visible only in the light of Lukács’. Galin Tihanov, The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of their Time, Oxford, 2000. pp. 10-11. This is simply to say, along with Saussure, that, to an important extent, ‘it is the viewpoint adopted that creates the object’. Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. by Roy Harris, London, 1983, p. 8.
Bakhtin) as an example of the method of this thesis. On this point, Paul de Man writes:

Whether the passage from otherness to the recognition of the other - the passage, in other words, from dialogism to dialogue - can be said to take place in Bakhtin as more than a desire, remains a question for Bakhtin interpretation to consider in the proper critical spirit. This renders premature any more specific consideration of how this recognition is to occur: as a religious transcendentalism which would allow one to read 'God' wherever Bakhtin says 'society,' as a Heideggerian disclosure of ontological truth in the otherness of language or as a secular but messianic ideologism that would bear a superficial, and perhaps misleading, resemblance to the position attributed to Walter Benjamin. To adjudicate between these various options would be unthinkable; what can be observed is that, in each case, dialogism appears as a provisional stage underway towards a more absolute claim, a claim that is not necessarily monological but that points, at any rate, well beyond the limited confines of literary theory. Whether such an extension of Bakhtin's range is sound and legitimate also remains to be established.²

This thesis responds to this and similar challenges that de Man and other critics have raised. I do not decide between the options that de Man outlines (one might well imagine an alternative piece of work that would follow any one of the other paths) but I stand by the legitimacy of the extension of Bakhtin that appears when the resemblance to Benjamin, which I hold to be neither superficial nor misleading, is brought to the fore. The new Bakhtin that appears in the light of Benjamin and the new Benjamin that appears in the light of Bakhtin seem, in these terms alone, to justify a thesis.

Connections

Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin inhabited worlds that seem, at first glance, to have few points of contact. The two months that Benjamin spent in Moscow in the winter of 1926-27 were marked by the failure of his love affair with the Latvian communist, Asja Lacis, and, despite the outwardly enthusiastic tone of his 'Moscow Diary', Benjamin found life in the city alienating and exhausting. Benjamin knew no more than a few words of Russian, and whilst his interest in Russian, and, especially, Soviet culture was, at times, passionate, it remained

second-hand and somewhat naive. It seems improbable that he could have come into contact with the Bakhtin Circle at all. Likewise, Bakhtin, who never left his native Russia and the Soviet Union, despite being rooted in the German-orientated Bildungskultur of his time, shows no evidence of having been acquainted with Benjamin or his work. Benjamin’s publications, in either book or magazine form, would have been unlikely to be accessible to Bakhtin, although one might speculate that Bakhtin was familiar with the entry on Goethe that was commissioned from Benjamin for the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia. Nevertheless, as Kassack points out in the editorial apparatus to the Gesammelte Schriften, the published text only contains 12 per cent of Benjamin’s original from which everything of substance has been eliminated. The points of connection, then, between the two subjects of this thesis are necessarily mediated, once again, obliquely.

First and most straightforwardly, one may speak of the two thinkers’ similar backgrounds in the European philosophical tradition. These might be considered diachronic contexts. In Chapter 2, I deal with Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s engagement with the philosophical opposition of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century between (neo-)Kantianism and Lebensphilosophie. I argue that these parallel engagements create structures that persist throughout the careers of the two thinkers and result in parallel emphases on the question of the relationship between life and culture, experience and form. Yet, as Chapter 2 and the thesis more generally show, a reconstruction of diachronic context is itself not straightforward given the far from straightforward ways in which the two thinkers relate to and represent their intellectual inheritances, nor is it a main aim of this thesis.4

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4 Brandist and Tihanov have performed the task of discovering, reconstructing and elucidating the many sources and ideas that Bakhtin draws on: Bergson, Cassirer, Scheler, Simmel, Walzel, Marty, and so forth. In the case of Brandist in particular, however, this can result in a reductionism that presents Bakhtin’s thought as little more than an admittedly imaginative combination of these sources. Thus, taking one of many possible examples, in connection with Bakhtin’s theory of laughter in the novel, Brandist demonstrates that Bakhtin’s two main influences are Bergson and Cassirer. It is debatable whether his subsequent comments add anything to Bakhtin’s theory of laughter other than a sophisticated and convincing argument that
Second, one may speak of the connections provided by intermediary figures on the synchronic axis. In particular, I am thinking of Georg Lukács, another thinker whose concern is the relationship between form and experience. Lukács’s early work, *The Theory of the Novel* (1914), exerted a profound influence on both thinkers. Similarly, just as his later work, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), provides a crucial subterranean strand in Benjamin’s thought from the *Trauerspiel* book onwards, so Tihanov, in his book on the subject, demonstrates in great detail the extent of Bakhtin’s complex debt to both the early and later Lukács. In Chapter 1, I discuss the mediation that is provided by the nexus of Brecht and Russian Formalism. The radical avant-garde aesthetics of both Brecht and Formalism present an extreme of a necessarily disruptive relationship between experience and form, a relationship conceived of as the automatization and deautomatization of life and art, which exerts a continuing influence on both thinkers. There are, however, many such possible lines of enquiry and following them up is also not a main aim of this thesis.

Third, it is possible to talk of a form of connection that is posthumous. As I argue in Chapter 1, both Bakhtin and Benjamin hold that the meanings contained in a work, and a work of philosophy as much as a work of art, are revealed in time in the process of criticism. The ideas of Bakhtin and Benjamin are brought together not just on the modest territory of this thesis but also in the intellectual developments that have followed them. By way of example: both thinkers have, to greater or lesser extents, been co-opted into varied discourses of post-Structuralism: Bakhtin, initially through Kristeva’s pioneering development of a post-Bakhtinian theory of intertextuality and later by thinkers who found in Bakhtin a gesture of perpetual openness, analogous to Derrida’s notion of the perpetual deferring of signification, which nevertheless did not jettison the notion of the individual subject.\(^5\) Benjamin, whose focus on the hidden resources of

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writing have proved an inspiration to those who have also been inspired by Derrida’s theory of grammatology and whose conception of reading ‘against the grain’ has likewise drawn the attention of proponents of Deconstruction. In both instances I contend that Bakhtin and Benjamin have lent themselves to such an appropriation because of their insistence that what seems at first to be a secondary phenomenon (dialogue, writing) might fruitfully be understood as of primary importance. Another case is that of Bakhtin’s collaborators, Voloshinov and Medvedev, whose work has, like that of Benjamin, provided some commentators on the left with a more Marx-based critique of Structuralism than the ideologically ambiguous approach of post-Structuralism. Nevertheless, the question of posthumous relationships between Benjamin and Bakhtin in the history of ideas, forged not only on the terrain of post-Structuralism, is not the prime focus of this thesis; and yet this thesis, I hope, opens up avenues for such lines of thought.


Eagleton, for example, finds in Benjamin’s thought support for a Derridean theory of writing with a Marxist edge. See Terry Eagleton, Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, London, 1981. Eagleton takes Benjamin’s notion of reading ‘against the grain’ as the title of his collection of essays, Terry Eagleton, Against the Grain: Selected Essays 1975-1985, London, 1986. This collection also contains an essay on Bakhtin.

Voloshinov and Medvedev have exerted a profound influence on thinkers of the British left, such as Raymond Williams, Tony Bennett, and, once again, Terry Eagleton. Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature, Oxford, 1977, and Tony Bennett, Formalism and Marxism, London, 1979.

The most interesting Derridean appropriation of Benjamin is by Derrida himself. In his essay, ‘The Force of Law’, Derrida turns his attention to Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’, reading into it a conception of law as the deferral of divine judgement. See Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The “mystical foundation of authority”’, in Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds), Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice, London, 1992, pp. 3-68. Brandist, without reference to Derrida, sees a similar conception of law in Bakhtin, and also points in passing to a similarity with Benjamin. See Craig Brandist, ‘Law and the Genres of Discourse: the Bakhtin Circle’s Theory of Language and the Phenomenology of Right’, in Finn Bostad, Craig Brandist, Lars Sigred Evensen and Hege Faber (eds), Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language and Culture: Meaning in Language, Art and New Media, London, 2004, pp. 23-45, especially pp. 39-40. The area of jurisprudence (which Brandist has opened up for Bakhtin scholarship) is another area in which analogies between Bakhtin and Benjamin might usefully be followed up.
Finally, the most important connection between the two thinkers must lie at the level of their different but analogous engagements with a world that is distinctively modern. This connection is more than a question of the three years that separate their births and I hope to show that it is based on more than an empty notion such as Zeitgeist. It is a commonplace to say that Benjamin is a thinker of modernity. His entire work is preoccupied with finding ways of negotiating and making sense of a rapidly changing modern world. As one of his biographers puts it:

His life's work [...] is basically a reflection on his own city origins. It amounts to a meditation on the experience of the individual's altering needs and possibilities within the labyrinth of constantly and rapidly changing impressions, on whether he can still perceive or grasp his historical and social environment in some sort of context, or indeed make any kind of picture of it. In a nutshell: how to cope, how to find one's way around.9

This is the question of experience and form. How can one find forms that allow the subject to grasp, yet do not distort, an experience that is post-traditional, located in the heart of modernity? Benjamin's writing has as its backdrop the traffic of the boulevard and the flickering of neon. The forms that he promotes, such as Baudelaire's poetry of shock and allegorical correspondances, Proust's prose that is convulsed by mémoires involontaires, or Brecht's epic theatre of interruption, articulate and preserve the rhythm of modern life. Even when Benjamin looks back to the Baroque, one eye is firmly fixed on his own present.

An engagement with the modern world is far less obvious in Bakhtin. For all his emphasis on the dynamic flow of life and the burning need for its preservation and not ossification as it takes on linguistic form, and for all his emphasis on the diversity of the social world, his world can seem remarkably bookish and rooted in the nineteenth century.10 It is to the chagrin of many...

10 Tihanov discerns a certain 'anachronistic' aspect to Bakhtin in his discussion of Bakhtin's concept of 'seeing' in the work on the Bildungsroman. He notes that for Bakhtin 'seeing' remains something unproblematic, whereas for Benjamin - for example in the work on Baudelaire - the impact of modern experience problematizes the notion of 'seeing': 'thus Bakhtin entertains hopes which appear utopian and perhaps somewhat anachronistic in comparison with other approaches to the culture of seeing in the 1930s, for example Walter Benjamin's bitter premonition that, with the
Bakhtin scholars that the most modern of Bakhtin's line of heroes is Dostoevsky and not, say, Joyce. Nevertheless, Bakhtin's commitment to the novel, the genre of emancipation that receives its form from modernity itself (as recognised by thinkers from Schlegel, through Hegel and Lukács, to Ian Watt and Lucien Goldmann), demonstrates his analogous search for formal models by which a specifically modern experience may be understood and in which it may justly find expression. The novel, the 'only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it' (D17), is, in Bakhtin's analysis, the anti-genre of becoming (in so far as genre may be defined as a congealed set of norms) through which the experience of modernity and the giving of form come into dynamic resolution.

Nevertheless, if the Bakhtin that appears in this thesis is more obviously a participant in his modernity than might be the case of a stand-alone Bakhtin, then the comparison with Benjamin throws certain absences and blank spots into relief. Despite his insistence on the social, at times Bakhtin's modernity seems to consist in a form of historical dynamism that is curiously devoid of content: a modernity of flux without a clear image of the technological and social developments that bring that flux into being. His indestructibly modern novelness may, at times, seem to be little more than an expression of Hegelian delight in a new expression of Geist.

From early on in his career, Benjamin is alive to the threat of the violence that emerges from what Adorno and Horkheimer will later analyse as the advance of modernity, the act of seeing itself becomes a focal point of contradictions rather than a means of disentangling them’. Tihanov, Master and Slave, p. 238.

11 Clark and Holquist comment: 'One of the many enigmas about Bakhtin is that he makes no mention in Rabelais of James Joyce's Ulysses, a book that might be described as a celebration of heteroglossia and of the body as well'. Clark and Holquist, Bakhtin, p. 317. Much literary-orientated Bakhtin scholarship makes an unacknowledged attempt to project Bakhtin into a far more modern world than that of Dostoevsky by engaging in Bakhtinian readings of modernist and post-modernist texts, as if, thereby, Bakhtin were being relocated in what should be his spiritual home. The theorist of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon, is one such critic who enlists Bakhtin as a theorist of parody for a postmodernity which she defines in terms of the proliferation of parody. Linda Hutcheon, 'Modern Parody and Bakhtin', in Morson and Emerson (eds), Rethinking Bakhtin, pp. 87-103.

12 Tihanov emphasizes the Hegelian element in Bakhtin's thought which previously had often remained obscured by scholars' preoccupation with Bakhtin's roots in neo-Kantianism. Tihanov also points to the tension between a sociological theory of the novel and a metaphysical, primarily Hegelian, theory of novelness that exists in Bakhtin's writings. See Tihanov, Master and Slave, especially, on this latter point, pp. 148-49.
entanglement of enlightenment and myth. This crystallizes in the impassioned and concrete analysis of and defence against fascism that occupies him from the late 1920s until his death. As I show in Chapter 2, Benjamin’s critique of fascism rests on his understanding of the relationship between experience and form: fascism, for Benjamin, consists in the fatal bringing together of a cult of mythic, pure experience with the abstract formal workings of capitalist technology. In this context, the case of Bakhtin is problematic: Bakhtin’s philosophy has proved so attractive to his readers exactly because his conception of form is one in which the experience of otherness can be negotiated without violence. And yet a comparison with Benjamin throws into sharp relief the question of Bakhtin’s disquieting silence in the face of Stalinist violence. Here, Benjamin’s more thorough-going and more responsible political engagement may be used to supplement Bakhtin, just as Bakhtin’s more concrete model of benign relations between self and other may be used to supplement Benjamin’s sometimes frustratingly vague pleas for cultural activity to engage in political combat with violence itself.

Incommensurabilities and Commensurabilities:

1. Melancholy and Laughter

A key difference between Bakhtin and Benjamin, and a difference that makes them seem, at times, incommensurable, is that of temperament. An analysis of this incommensurability will do much to illustrate the method of this thesis.

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13 This is not a new argument amongst critics of Bakhtin. Morson and Emerson, for example, comment: ‘the most vulnerable side of dialogue, Bakhtin may have sensed, is its benevolence’. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, Stanford CA, 1993, pp. 469-70. My point is that Benjamin’s position highlights this side of Bakhtin particularly starkly.

14 The oblique angle of comparison, where the perspective of one thinker highlights the blindspots of the other, has, I hope, enabled me to take as disinterested an approach as possible to both thinkers. Rochlitz notes that his book on Benjamin, despite his admiration for the thinker and the individual, is not meant to be hagiographical: ‘Until now, too many studies of Benjamin have manifested a fascination – often recognizable in a virtually uncritical imitation, encouraged, as it happens, by the seductive, assured, even authoritarian style of Benjamin’s writing – that limits any real productivity of the work.’ Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, trans. by Jane Marie Todd, New York, 1996, p. 3. I have attempted to avoid these pitfalls.
If Bakhtin is a theorist of laughter and celebration, Benjamin comes across as resolutely melancholy and sober. The image of Benjamin the melancholic is fixed most firmly in the writings of his friend, Gershom Scholem. Scholem's biographical *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, which in 1988 was claimed to be 'by far the most cited secondary source in the critical literature', portrays Benjamin primarily in terms of melancholy. Likewise, in his speech given in 1972 to commemorate what would have been Benjamin's eightieth birthday, Scholem reads Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History' as the expression of his return to his 'true' theological roots following the disillusion caused by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. This return to theology is the result of deep melancholy and, for Scholem, Benjamin's angel of history is a harbinger of melancholy:

> If one may speak of Walter Benjamin's genius, then it was concentrated in this angel. In the latter's Saturnine light Benjamin's life itself ran its course, also consisting only of 'small-scale victories' and 'large-scale defeats,' as he described it from a deeply melancholy point of view in a letter which he addressed to me on July 26, 1932, one day before his intended, but at the time not executed suicide.

The effect of Scholem's melancholic picture is an extraordinary depoliticization of Benjamin's thought. This is part of a deliberate strategy on the part of Scholem, who wishes to disentangle Benjamin in a posthumous fashion from the clutches of materialism and draw him back to the Jewish, mystical tradition. In addition, however, one sees here the outlines of what has now developed into a full-blown cult: the cult of Benjamin's suicide which casts him as the first victim of Nazism and the victim of history *par excellence*. Benjamin becomes the victim of his comments in 'The Storyteller', which I discuss later in the thesis and loosely paraphrase here: a man who, in memory, is destined all his life to die by his own hand, if not at the age of thirty-five, then at the age of forty-eight. Such a melancholic view of the specificity of Nazi brutality, however, robs it of historical meaning and transforms it into the mere object of pathos.

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16 Scholem, 'Walter Benjamin and his Angel', p. 86.
Just as Scholem, in the speech referred to above, accuses his audience of marxisants post-soixante-huitards of canonizing Benjamin as a saint of the revolutionary cause, so the fascination of critics (and even of those outside the academy to whom the name Walter Benjamin means something) with his death has made Benjamin a martyr to the cause of universal victimhood. Contemplating Benjamin in this muddled-headedly meta-Benjaminian way results in a melancholic gaze into the past which, once again, depoliticizes. Leslie’s comments are useful:

Benjamin as tragic hero, torn apart by melancholy and the difficulty of existing, becomes detached from the political history in which and against which he was engaged actively. There is a danger of memory as disempowerment, as sweet melancholy. Benjamin notes the tendency for memory and memorials to fetishize the act of remembering and not the remembrance of acting. In his *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin sketches the ‘brooder’, the pre-eminent melancholy subject, who dwells on fragments, clouded by a tormented sense of occluded significance indwelling in insignificant things.17

Similarly, Pensky contrasts Benjamin’s concern with the nature of melancholy with his attempts to turn melancholy against itself in the cause of action. Drawing attention to Benjamin’s review of Erich Kaestner’s poetry, he highlights Benjamin’s venomous rejection of ‘leftist melancholia’, defined as ‘self-indulgence and passivity tricked out as social criticism’, and his search instead for critical forms of melancholy, such as *Trauerspiel*, which can be transformed into its active opposite.18

I have been led, however, by the comparison with Bakhtin and his apparently contrary emphasis on laughter, to look again at Benjamin and recognise in his work a theory of laughter.19 This theory appears first in nascent

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18 Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning*, Amherst MA, p. 247. Benjamin’s review, ‘Left-wing Melancholia’, was so venomous that the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, which had commissioned it, refused to publish it. Benjamin’s review concludes in an almost Nietzschean fashion: ‘The rumbling in these lines certainly has more to do with flatulence than subversion. Constipation and melancholy have always gone together. But since the juices began to dry up in the body social, stuffiness meets us at every turn. Kaestner’s poems do not improve the air [*machen die Luft nicht besser*]’ (*GS* III 283; *SW* II 426). This quotation, and particularly the pun in the last sentence, is an example of a Benjaminian joke.
19 One question that lends itself, however, only to speculation is the influence on Benjamin of his close friend, the conservative intellectual, Florens Christian Rang, and his theory of carnival.
form in Benjamin’s dissertation, ‘The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’ (1920). Here, Benjamin marks out an opposition between ironic scorn and sobriety. The serious and prosaic mode of reflection is the mode in which the truth content of the work of art is revealed as the ‘eternal sober continuance of the work’ (GS I 109; SW I 178). Nevertheless, withering, ironic and scornful satire that reveals the absurdity in the bad work of art (which, hence, for the Romantics, is not art at all) is a necessary clearing of the ground that establishes what is criticizable and hence what is art:

The Romantic terminus technicus for the posture that corresponds to the axiom of the uncriticizability of the bad – not only in art, but in all realms of intellectual life – is “annihilate.” It designates the indirect refutation of the nugatory through silence, through ironic praise, or through the high praise of the good. The mediacy of irony is, in Schlegel’s mind, the only mode in which criticism can directly confront the nugatory. (GS I 79-80; SW I 160)

The cruel laughter of irony is necessary as the destruction of illusion. Laughter (here as scorn) and sobriety exist in dialectical interdependence.

Benjamin’s theory of laughter reappears later in his work, particularly in his analysis of Brecht’s epic theatre. In ‘The Author as Producer’ (1934), he writes: ‘there is no better trigger for thinking than laughter. In particular, convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul. Epic theatre is lavish only in occasions for laughter’ (GS II 699; SW II 779). Gilloch has rightly recognized the connection that links this conception of laughter in Brecht to the theory of irony in Benjamin’s work on the Romantics:

Such mirth has nothing to do with the entertainment of the culture industry. It is the bitter, withering laughter of romantic irony which liquidates mediocrity; it is the scornful, ruinous laughter of Surrealism.

Rang’s lecture of 1909, which Benjamin knew in manuscript form, develops a theory of carnival that, in its heavily Nietzschean tone, reads like a dark obverse to Bakhtin’s thought. The key to Rang’s conception of carnival is scornful laughter [Hohngelächter] which tears down spiritual hierarchies as the ‘first blasphemy’. Carnival laughter is also, as in Bakhtin, a means of combating fear: in ancient carnival man got intoxicated ‘until he finally did not take himself seriously; until he cast off his cares and the spectre became comical; he abandoned God, as well as the false God of being a good man; he drank away his fear with scorn and laughter’. Florens Christian Rang, ‘Historische Psychologie des Karnevals’, in Rang, Karneval, ed. by Lorenz Jäger, Berlin, 1983, pp. 7-45 (18).
which humiliates the obsolete and absurd. Brecht’s plays resound to a loud liberating laughter.  

Once again, laughter is a critical debunking, a clearing of ground, akin to Bakhtin’s concept of ‘parodic destruction’. But it is more than mere debunking; it is a deconstructive prerequisite, the starting point for something else: sober reflection, as in Romantic criticism, and now, in his treatment of Brecht, political action. Laughter and seriousness in Benjamin’s thought must be comprehended as dialectically intertwined. The result of this comprehension is, unlike the effect of critics’ pathological melancholization of Benjamin, his repoliticization.  

Turning back to Bakhtin from Benjamin’s theory of laughter that only came to the fore in the light of Bakhtin, the Bakhtin who now reappears has likewise been transformed. It is easy to find a Bakhtin who stands firmly on the side of laughter in an opposition between laughter and melancholy. According to Bakhtin in the Rabelais book (1965), on feast days, medieval students were:

freed from the heavy chains of devout seriousness, from the ‘continual ferment of piety and the fear of God.’ They were freed from the oppression of such gloomy categories as ‘eternal,’ ‘immovable,’ ‘absolute,’ ‘unchangeable’ and instead were exposed to the gay and

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21 Benjamin’s conception of barbaric laughter in ‘Experience and Poverty’ (1933) is similar in its effect: ‘In its buildings, pictures, and stories, mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be. And the main thing is that it does so with a laugh. This laughter may occasionally sound barbaric. Well and good. Let us hope that from time to time the individual will give a little humanity to the masses, who one day will repay him with compound interest’ (GS II 219; SW II 735). Likewise, as well as seeing in Baudelaire an heir to Baroque melancholia, Benjamin also celebrates his ‘satanic laughter’ (GS I 680; SW IV 182).

22 Eagleton notes: ‘the melancholy of Western Marxism, bred largely by a history of proletarian defeat, represents the massive loss of an essential dimension of historical materialism. No greater contrast in the annals of Marxist writing could be provided than that between Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* and Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World*.’ Eagleton, *Benjamin*, p. 144. He thus reveals what a Bakhtinian standpoint can bring to our image of Benjamin.

23 The English translation of Bakhtin’s work on Rabelais, *Rabelais and his World*, is of Bakhtin’s *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul’tura srednevekov’ia i renessansa* (The Art of François Rabelais and the Popular Culture of the Middle Ages) which was published in 1965. This was a revised version of a text composed 1940-46 which had its basis in Bakhtin’s doctoral dissertation. I shall refer to the book as ‘the Rabelais book’.
free laughing aspect of the world, with its open and unfinished character, with the joy of change and renewal. (*Rabelais* 83)

Nevertheless, if certain strands in the critical literature on Benjamin have subjected him to a thorough melancholization that renders him politically immobile, so, too, some critics of Bakhtin have emphasized this theory of laughter to the extent of emptying his thought of any substance. The theory of decrowning, debunking laughter in Bakhtin’s writings raises the serious matter of how far such laughter’s acquiesces with, even participates in, violence.24 Furthermore, Bakhtin’s emphasis on carnival laughter is used by some critics to paint him as a post-ideological liberal. Thus, for example, Clark and Holquist contend that Bakhtin’s laughing Rabelais is a champion of unbridled relativism:

Rabelais’s importance lies not in his own particular ideology but in his awareness of the limits, the incompleteness of any ideology. No matter how serious Rabelais appears to be at any point in a text, he makes sure to leave a gap, to provide what Bakhtin calls a ‘merry loophole’ – a loophole that opens on the distant future and that lends an aspect of ridicule to the present or to the immediate future [...].25

The Rabelais that results may have a ‘key place in the history of freedom’, as Clark and Holquist put it,26 but, through a denial of the possibility of seriousness, such a freedom becomes purely negative; it is the empty, reactive, if not passive phenomenon of liberation, rather than positive and concrete freedom.27 What emerges is a curiously depoliticized Bakhtin.


26 Clark and Holquist, *Bakhtin*, p. 320.

27 I am referring to the distinction made by Arendt. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, London, 1991. As quoted by Emerson, Sergei Averintsev, in his article, ‘Bakhtin, smekh, kristianskaia kul’tura’, in *Rossia/Russia*, 1988, 6, makes a similar point, also, it seems, drawing on this distinction: ‘Laughter is always experienced as movement “from a certain unfreedom to a certain freedom,” which is to say that laughter is “not freedom, but liberation.”’ As such, there is an inevitable mechanical and involuntary aspect to it, the initiating gesture of a person who is not yet free.’ Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, Princeton NJ, 1997, p. 181.
It is necessary, however, to reassess the relationship between laughter and seriousness in Bakhtin’s thought. In part, this reassessment has already taken place as a result of the critical discovery of Bakhtin’s early works, the tone of which is unquestionably serious. Furthermore, religious readings of Bakhtin have helped to rebalance the issue. The focus of Coates’s book, for example, on the central theme of the Fall produces a far more serious, if not melancholy, image of Bakhtin’s thought. Independently of a necessarily religious frame of reference, however, Coates’s technique also involves an inversion of the standard reading of Bakhtin. Where other critics see in Bakhtin’s theory of the polyphonic novel the joyful arrival and coming-to-voice of liberated subjects, Coates sees the melancholy exile and falling silent of the author. She traces progressive narratives of exile in Bakhtin’s work, which comprise the exile of ‘God Himself, whose supremely authoritative discourse has been squeezed out of the world of culture as a result of the same paradigmatic shift which, if Bakhtin is correct, forced the writer of prose fiction to hide his or her true self’. This view of Bakhtin, as will become clear in Chapter 3, bears marked similarities to the position of Benjamin in ‘Of Language as Such and of the Language of Man’ that likewise describes a post-lapsarian world of silence and melancholy. Similarly, both Coates and Hirschkop have drawn attention to the distinction (that emerges most clearly in the notes towards a revision of the Rabelais book) between official seriousness, the legitimate target of laughter, and its unofficial counterpart that Bakhtin describes in very Benjaminian, melancholic tones: ‘the unofficial seriousness of suffering, of fear, of fright, of weakness, the seriousness of the slave and the seriousness of the sacrificial victim’ which expresses ‘the ultimate protest of individuality (bodily and spiritual) yearning for immortality, against change and absolute renewal, the protest of the part against its dissolution in the whole’.

A perspective gained from Benjamin may produce something in addition. Benjamin, I have argued, sees laughter as the dialectical precondition for a genuine seriousness. It is the agent of clearing and cleansing new territory. It is possible to see a similar dialectic at work in Bakhtin. Bakhtin writes in the Dostoevsky book: 

Carnivalization is not an eternal and immobile schema which is imposed upon ready-made content; it is, rather, an extraordinarily flexible form of artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of heuristic principle making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things. By relativizing all that was externally stable, set and ready-made, carnivalization with its pathos of change and renewal permitted Dostoevsky to penetrate into the darkest layers of man and human relationships. It proved remarkably productive as a means for capturing in art the developing relationships under capitalism, at a time when previous forms of life, moral principles and beliefs were being turned into “rotten cords” and the previously concealed, ambivalent and unfinalized nature of man and human thought was being nakedly exposed. (DP 165-66)

I suggest that this passage is subtly double-voiced. The passage with which it appears to polemicize is a passage from the Communist Manifesto:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober sense his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.31

Bakhtin appears to be implying a structural analogy between the relativizing dynamism of carnival and the revolutionizing dynamism of capital. Both forces invert previous hierarchies. Both forces transform all that they touch (‘moral principles’ and ‘venerable prejudices and opinions’). Carnival blasphemy finds its counterpart in the profaning of all that is holy; ‘fixed, fast frozen relations’ find their counterpart in what is ‘externally stable, set and ready-made’; carnival

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30 See my comments below in the section on ‘Selection of Material and Chronology’ on the difficulties in referring to the Dostoevsky book and its dating.

overturning of the hierarchies of courtly culture finds its counterpart in the bourgeois revolutionizing of feudal social and economic relations of production. Here is not the place to dwell on what sort of testimony this double-voiced passage does or does not bear to Bakhtin’s Marxism. My concern is with the parallel that I have established in so far as it affects the last part of these two passages. The intoxication of Marx’s description of capitalism finds its terminus in sobriety: man’s compulsion to face with sobriety the real conditions of his existence. So, too, with Bakhtin: the terminus is not the laughter of the carnival mask but the nakedness that follows. The historical and philosophical significance of laughter is not laughter itself but the new form of seriousness that it enables to come into being. As Bakhtin comments of Rabelais: ‘while breaking up the false seriousness, false historic pathos, he prepared the soil for a new seriousness and for a new historic pathos’ (Rabelais 439). Laughter, then, far from being the inaction and irresponsibility of eternal relativization, clears the ground, as in Benjamin’s thought, for a new form of seriousness that makes responsible action possible.

Laughter, for Bakhtin and Benjamin, is an instrument of reconfigured, anti-Aristotelian catharsis. Bakhtin comments on this in the Dostoevsky book:

Certain scholars [...] apply to Dostoevsky’s works the ancient (Aristotelian) term ‘catharsis’ (purification). If this term is understood in a very broad sense, then one can agree with it [...] . But tragic catharsis (in the Aristotelian sense) is not applicable to Dostoevsky. The catharsis that finalizes Dostoevsky’s novels might be [...] expressed in this way: nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future. But this is, after all, also the purifying sense of ambivalent laughter. (DP 165-66)

It is necessary to reassess this passage, the second part of which might well be used in support of a conception of Bakhtin as a propagandist of a vacuous relativism of mere possibility. For both Bakhtin and Benjamin, laughter clears the ground and purifies. This is an inversion of the Aristotelian view. According to Aristotle: ‘Tragedy, then, is a representation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude [...] and through the arousal of pity and fear
effecting the *katharsis* of such emotions. ’ Pity and fear move the spectator; s/he is intoxicated by wonder (*rhaumaston*). Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s unserious mimesis, not of the great and complete, but of the everyday and incomplete, consists of a laughter that knows no pity and fear and results not in intoxication but in sobriety. According to Benjamin’s analysis of Brecht’s theory of epic theatre, Aristotelian theatre, which works through tragic catharsis, is politically affirmative of the status quo, paralysing human beings and shutting out possibilities for genuine change. An anti-Aristotelian catharsis through laughter that results in a new seriousness, such as seems to be visible in Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s theory of laughter, may equip human beings for genuine change and action.

The apparent incommensurability that doubtless exists between Bakhtin the theorist of carnival laughter and Benjamin the melancholic may, through the oblique approach of comparison that I take in this thesis, be reconsidered to double effect: first, such an approach might present both thinkers in a new and transforming light; second, it might bring new insights to the substance in which the incommensurability inheres: here, the relationship between laughter and seriousness.

2. Marxism and Theology

Marxism and theology may or may not be incommensurable. Certainly, however, it is at the level of their commensurability that a comparison of Bakhtin and Benjamin is most productive. The worlds of Benjamin and Bakhtin scholarship are divided by the differing standpoints that critics take on Bakhtin’s or Benjamin’s commitment to either Marxism or theology. This thesis does not aim to solve the controversies. Rather, I intend to suggest some possible approaches to the problem, with the overall aim of maximizing rather than reducing the dimensions of Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s thought.

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Let us turn to one of Benjamin’s most striking images of the relationship between theology and Marxism from ‘On the Concept of History’ (1940):

There was once, we know, an automaton constructed in such a way that it could respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of a game. A puppet wearing Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent on all sides. Actually, a hunchbacked dwarf—a master at chess—sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophic counterpart to this apparatus. The puppet, called ‘historical materialism’, is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight. (GS I 693; SW IV 389)

In Bakhtin and Benjamin scholarship, theology is sometimes the dwarf who must keep out of sight. Leslie is one critic who demands that this be the case. Her study of Benjamin exhibits an extraordinary capacity for pushing Benjamin’s theological motifs to the sidelines. Nevertheless, her main statement on the matter is useful: ‘Benjamin is not concerned with developing or interpreting religious doctrine in any sense. That was more the work of Scholem. Religious motifs are one part of a versatile montage strategy, rather than evidence of ardent religious commitment.’ Ignoring some of the many assumptions in this statement, I should like to focus on one. Leslie is correct in stating that religious motifs form one part of a versatile montage strategy. Her study assumes, however, that she knows exactly what battle is being fought, namely a Marxist-revolutionary one. It follows that religious motifs, as a montaged element, are dismissed as little more than rhetorical tropes that are subordinate to the governing political direction of Benjamin’s project. What is potentially a plural montage of Benjamin’s thought is, in Leslie’s hands, reduced to singularity.

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33 Leslie only deals with Benjamin’s writings after 1923-24 and what she discerns as the beginnings of his conversion to materialism. Leslie, *Benjamin*.  
35 This is not to say that I wish to subordinate Benjamin’s politics to his theology. Such an approach is taken by Helmut Salzinger in his *Swinging Benjamin*, Frankfurt/Main, 1973, who seeks, in the spirit of his own times, to make a materialist theologian out of Benjamin, in the line of the Anabaptist revolutionary, Thomas Müntzer. It seems important that Benjamin’s theological discourse is understood as a discourse in its own right and as a discourse that is far from opposed to Benjamin’s political discourse. Nevertheless, as Arno Münster points out, it is possible to go along with Salzinger in so far as the end of class struggle might be marked by a ‘double happening both religious and political’ in which the ‘social revolution, as realization of the reign of liberty
Leslie finds her Bakhtinian counterpart in Brandist. In the brief paragraph devoted to religion in his monograph, Brandist seems happy to accept that Bakhtin was a religious man. None the less, Brandist attempts to reduce the theological aspect of Bakhtin’s thought to nothing:

While his work includes terminology with a theological history, there is little evidence to suggest that he actually drew on theological sources. […] There are important distinctions between religion, religious philosophy and a philosophy of religion, and religious overtones detected in a basically secular philosophy are a different matter again. In addition to this, the terminology of German idealism did not find simple philosophical equivalents in Russian, where there was no established philosophical discourse at the beginning of the century. Terms with religious connotations were thus often adopted for general philosophical discussions.36

There are many things to object to here, but, once again, I wish to focus on one: Brandist’s reductionism. This passage displays the tendency of Brandist’s entire monograph to reduce Bakhtin to his sources in European philosophy (a tendency that I note elsewhere). Furthermore, it is a reduction of Bakhtin’s multi-voiced discourse to one particular set of voices (the secular European philosophical voices) and no other (theological voices). In a fashion similar to Leslie’s treatment of Benjamin, Brandist assumes that he can detect what are fortuitous overtones and, presumably, what are authentic undertones.

For this study, the question of the relationship of philosophy, politics (which generally means Marxism) and theology is a question of the relation of different discourses in Bakhtin’s work. I attempt to take an approach that listens to the full range of competing voices and their claims, just as, in my treatment of Benjamin, I attempt to preserve a simultaneous awareness of the complexity of juxtapositions in the montage of his thought. Eagleton’s comments run along more correct, if perhaps topsy-turvy, lines:

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Nor can Bakhtin be merely appropriated as a materialist. It would now appear that behind his work lies a Judaeo-Christian mysticism in some ways akin to Benjamin's — that *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* contains as its secret code a theological devotion to the incarnational unity of word and being similar to that which marks Benjamin's own mediations.\(^{37}\)

The choice of the word 'code' here is unfortunate, for code, once again, implies a priority of the covert over the overt. The code must work both ways: Bakhtin's theological discourse must be understood as containing a message that is relevant to human beings as social and political subjects, just as a meditation on the social and political implications of his thought must not expel his theology.

The approach of this thesis is to see theological and political themes in Bakhtin and Benjamin not in terms of their mutual exclusivity but in terms of their possible alliance. (One might also remember here the argument of thinkers such as Carl Schmitt that religion and politics have only recently parted company and that our political thinking might still be structured by theological concepts — this might be especially true from a Jewish standpoint.)\(^{38}\) Ultimately, it must be conceded that this approach runs into certain buffers: the evidence seems overwhelming that Benjamin does indeed 'break with esotericism' in favour of materialism, as Habermas puts it, and all Scholem's patient argumentation will not win him back.\(^{39}\) Similarly, the evidence against certainly a Marxist Bakhtin, if not against a political Bakhtin, will not refuse to stack up.\(^{40}\) In this sense, though their strategies are similar, the nature of the alliances the two thinkers forge are different: in the end, on the one hand, Benjamin's wizened dwarf is indisputably in the service of historical materialism; on the other hand, the voice of Marxism in Bakhtin's discourse is not the final voice.


\(^{38}\) According to Schmitt, all 'significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts'; thus the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver. It is only with the twin development of Enlightenment rationalism - which banishes miracle - and the theory of the modern constitutional state - which seeks to curtail the power of the sovereign - that this underlying truth has been repressed. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (1922), trans. by George Schwab, Cambridge MA, 1985, p. 36. The notion of Israel as God's chosen people is the source of the close connection between theology and politics in Jewish thought.

\(^{39}\) See Jürgen Habermas, 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique', in Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin*, pp. 90-128 (109).

\(^{40}\) Coates's arguments, for example, are persuasive, although I qualify some of them later. See the chapter, 'Was Bakhtin a Marxist?', in Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin*, pp. 57-83.
An insistence on the irreducible theological and political double-voicedness of Bakhtin and Benjamin might appear to evince an unwillingness to take a decision; it might constitute a form of what Bakhtin terms alibi. Leslie, once again, writes forcefully and originally on this issue:

Filtered through the refracting lenses of Scholem, of Heidegger, of the postmodern and of poststructuralism, Benjamin returns to us now as either fractured or multiplied. [...] He is torn between the messianic and the material [...]. Angelic Benjamin floats in theory as a half-figure – half-Marxist, half-Jew – and the partiality of his identifications makes it impossible to locate his theory, and it places him on a border that cuts through all his work, and even (deconstructively? actually?) killed him.\(^41\)

This thesis is about the multiplication of its subjects. This multiplication, however, does not aim at crippling fracture but rather at intensification. Leslie and Brandist are guilty, in their own ways, of seeing only half of their subjects. The question, one that is rarely posed, remains: what is at stake in this game of chess? Brandist is correct, quoting Natorp as his ‘source’, in saying that, for Bakhtin, religion was treated ‘within the bounds of humanity’.\(^42\) This is true also of Benjamin. Both thinkers are concerned with religion as a matter of human experience. For both Bakhtin and Benjamin, then, the emphasis is on the divine as the sphere of the (possible) fulfilment of strictly human needs, hopes and calls for justice. Bakhtin and Benjamin, the chess-players, seek to win for the sake of the integrity of the human being within history, not for the sake of abstract and eternal theological truth. They use theological and political strategies as tools of intensification. Whether Marx is to come to the aid of religion, or religion to the aid of Marx, it still follows that, with the confusing but necessary obfuscation of smoke and mirrors, the automaton of historical materialism and the ugly dwarf of theology are both playing the same opponent.

**Relation to Critical Literature**

I have deliberately left my treatment of the position that this thesis adopts in relation to the existing critical literature on Bakhtin and Benjamin until this late

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stage in the Introduction. For, in outlining, in discursive fashion, the approach that underpins my thematic comparison of the two thinkers, I should have made much of this position reasonably clear.

There is a huge volume of secondary literature on both Bakhtin and Benjamin, which increases almost daily.\textsuperscript{43} This has presented a challenge to a thesis the ambition of which it is to be a study of not one, but two thinkers who command such a high degree of attention. This Introduction cannot attempt a thorough survey of this material, but I will give an indication of how I have used the critical literature and how certain strands and approaches relate to my own contribution.

In the case of Bakhtin, linguistic limitations have prevented me from engagement with the Russian secondary literature, although I have benefited from Emerson's survey of Russian responses to Bakhtin over the past century, as well as from critics such as Tihanov and Coates who engage with these responses. In the case of Benjamin, whilst I have largely drawn on Anglo-American scholarship, I also draw on a range of German Benjamin scholarship, both in German and in English translation.\textsuperscript{44} Another resource that has been helpful has been the French tradition of Benjamin scholarship. This tradition seems to be less radically polarized by the question of Marxism and theology than the Anglo-American and German traditions, and, hence, contains a refined presentation of the relationship between politics and theology in Benjamin’s thought.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{43} Fuller bibliographical information may be found in the following places: for Bakhtin, the best source is the online analytical bibliographical database of Sheffield University’s Bakhtin Centre. Hirschkop’s \textit{Bakhtin} contains a fairly full listing of both primary and secondary material. Adlam’s essay provides a brief survey and bibliography of secondary material up to 2001. Adlam, ‘Critical Work on the Bakhtin Circle’. For Benjamin, Momme Brodersen’s \textit{Bibliografia critica generale}, Palermo, 1984, deals with the years 1913-83. The years 1983-92 are covered in Reinhard Markner and Thomas Weber (eds), \textit{Literatur über Walter Benjamin. Kommentierte Bibliographie 1983-92}, Berlin, 1993. Leslie gives her analysis of some of the main themes in recent Benjamin scholarship in Leslie, \textit{Benjamin}, pp. 219-28.

\textsuperscript{44} As well as the texts of Scholem and Habermas, referred to above, I engage with other major works of German Benjamin scholarship such as Winfried Menninghaus, \textit{Walter Benjamin: Theorie der Sprachmagie}, Frankfurt/Main, 1995, and Rolf Tiedemann, \textit{Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamin}, Frankfurt/Main, 1973.

\textsuperscript{45} Löwy’s study stands out here in its lucid account of the political theology of Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’. Michel Löwy, \textit{Walter Benjamin: Avertissement d’incendie. Une Lecture des thèses "sur le concept d’histoire"}, Paris, 2001. Likewise, Münster’s work provides an analysis of
As regards Bakhtin scholarship, I should like to draw attention to a number of strands. The first of these is that emerging from Brandist and Tihanov who have sought to locate Bakhtin in the European, largely German, philosophical tradition. The rather aggressive edge of some of this work has perhaps been necessary as part of a strategy of wresting Bakhtin from the hands of literary scholars. This thesis draws substantially on that research, as it has provided a much more substantial bridge linking the worlds of Bakhtin and Benjamin. In particular, Tihanov’s and Brandist’s insights into Bakhtin’s relationship to neo-Kantianism and Lebensphilosophie have been essential. Brandist’s tendency, noted above, to reduce Bakhtin to the sum of his influences, combined with a lack of interest in the ethical and theological dimensions of Bakhtin’s thought that can amount to dismissal, has created productive tensions. Tihanov’s study of Lukács and Bakhtin is an exhaustively researched work of penetrating analysis. It has been a steady point of reference in my own comparative work.

A second strand, often allied to the first, consists in the sociological and political-theoretical reading of Bakhtin that one finds in the work of Michael Gardiner and Ken Hirschkop. Gardiner’s work usefully interprets the Bakhtin Circle’s work in relation to the Western Marxist tradition in which Benjamin occupies a curious but central position. His article on Bakhtin and Bloch, the friend and collaborator of Benjamin, has opened avenues for this study. Similarly, his bringing together of Bakhtin and Gramsci (a feature also of Brandist’s work) is a theme that is not directly followed up by this thesis but that has been of influence. Hirschkop’s work has the virtue of being the first major attack on the American tradition of Bakhtin scholarship, which I discuss below. His contribution to the polemic collected in the volume edited by Morson is of

the relationship between historical materialism and Jewish messianism in Benjamin that sees the two categories in dialectical interdependence. See Münster, Progrès et catastrophe.

46 See, in particular, Brandist, The Bakhtin Circle, and Tihanov, Master and Slave.
continuing relevance as a warning against the reduction of Bakhtin to the mere play of difference. I cannot agree with the fundamental interpretation of Bakhtin as a Habermasian theorist of the public sphere. Nevertheless, the expansive nature of Hirschkop’s study, its willingness to speculate whilst being rooted in text and its attempt to pinpoint Bakhtin’s actuality are all valuable.

A third strand consists of American critical responses to Bakhtin. First, there are Emerson and Morson who have done most, perhaps, to set Bakhtin scholarship on a solid footing. In particular their Prosaics is exactly thorough in its periodization of Bakhtin’s work and its careful reconstruction of Bakhtinian concepts and idiom. Nevertheless, their liberal orientation contains a tendency—discussed more fully in Chapter 4—to present Bakhtin as a thinker of mere possibility and openness. Emerson’s later text, however, is a scholarly and sophisticated treatment of responses to Bakhtin that provides both a penetrating assessment of the past and present of Bakhtin scholarship and an important piece of cultural history writing. Second, there are Holquist and Clark. Whilst it must be conceded that their study was, in its time, a ground-breaking piece of work, subsequent scholarship has revealed its many shallow interpretations and untenable assertions. Their position on the question of authorship now seems untenable, particularly in the light of the persuasive arguments of Emerson and Morson. Most important, what remains in Emerson and Morson’s work a mere tendency becomes in Clark and Holquist a full-blown project to present Bakhtin as the hero of a liberal narrative of mere difference.

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50 Hirschkop, Bakhtin.
51 Morson and Emerson, Bakhtin.
52 Emerson, The First Hundred Years.
53 Clark and Holquist, Bakhtin.
54 Žižek comments on the ‘liberal’ celebration of the multiplicity of mere difference which he describes as ‘the obliteration of Difference in the boring repetitive perverse Sameness which serves as the container of this multitude’. Slavoj Žižek, Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?, London, 2001, p. 238. I return to the question of ‘mere difference’ in my conclusion.
Finally, religiously oriented work on Bakhtin presents a fourth strand. I have already made substantial comments on the question of religion. Coates's work stands out as a persuasive reading of Bakhtin's work that is alive to the textual nuances as well as to the architectural structure of Bakhtin's thought. Mihailovic's monograph is of less value as a result of its more tendentious focus on Bakhtin as a thinker rooted in (Russian) Orthodoxy. I prefer to emphasize Bakhtin's allegiance to a theological mode of thinking per se rather than to a specifically Orthodox tradition. The essays collected in Contino and Felch's edited volume, Bakhtin and Religion, open up a wide variety of approaches to religious themes in Bakhtin. In particular, Poole's essay on apophasis in Bakhtin and Pechey's essay, which highlights similarities between Benjamin's theology and that of Bakhtin, have provided valuable insights.

In the case of Benjamin, one confronts a more established critical tradition that, in part as a result, is less easily divisible into analogous strands. Benjamin's interests (philosophy, literature, religion, the visual arts, politics, popular culture, kitsch, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and so forth) are also more disparate than those of Bakhtin and he deals with more wide-ranging material. This means that the scholarly literature on his work is correspondingly more disparate. Bakhtin is, at heart, a philosopher of the experience of self and other, subsequently a philosopher of the word, and next a philosopher of artistic genre. He pursues these interests with undoubted breadth of thought but with an intensity of focus on verbal and literary culture. Benjamin also is concerned with such things, but he is, in addition, a theorist of technology, of visual experience, of urban experience, and so forth, and critics have constructed images of Benjamin that present him in an effective fashion in these later terms.

55 In particular, Coates, Christianity in Bakhtin.  
The most important recent development in Benjamin studies has been the attempt to present Benjamin as, above all, a philosopher. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne’s introduction to the edited volume, *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, constitutes what is almost a manifesto for this appropriation:

Why read Benjamin today? The simplicity of the question is disarming. There are as many answers as there are Benjamins: Benjamin the Critic, Benjamin the Marxist, Benjamin the Modernist, Benjamin the Jew... Behind each of them, however, in one way or other, stands Benjamin the philosopher.59

The result has been a reorientation of Benjamin. According to Andrew Benjamin and Osborne, previously Arendt’s portrayal of Benjamin as an ‘alchemist-critic’ had largely been dominant in English-language Benjamin scholarship.60 Since then, a variety of critics have sought to relocate Benjamin in relation to Kant, Derrida, Leibniz, Plato, Nietzsche, Spinoza, among others, and, above all, to the perennially questionable figure of Heidegger.61 Whilst there is no doubting the legitimacy of such endeavours as exercises in academic philosophy, it is exactly

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60 Rochlitz notes a similar emphasis in French scholarship on Benjamin as a literary critic that his study sets out to correct. Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, pp. 8-9.

as such that these contributions to Benjamin scholarship seem to be off the mark.

Here I agree with Leslie:

Commentators in the 1990s have seen Benjamin’s intention to be that of someone who ‘sought to render experience philosophically’. But more apt might be the converse: that Benjamin seeks to undermine the hypotheses of philosophy by conceptualizing specific experience and, vitally, the socio-historical conditions of transformations of experience. Philosophy is truly too bloodless for Benjamin. [...] The sealed universe of the poststructuralist contribution to Benjaminology offers a temporality without history.62

Despite the problems with Leslie’s approach that I have already noted, the acumen of her Marxist-oriented analysis of Benjamin’s contextual and contemporary actuality is superb. Her work is invaluable in many senses, not least because of her aim of rescuing Benjamin from those critics in whose hands he is relentlessly domesticated, apoliticized and rendered bloodless.

Whilst the philosophical Benjamin to be found in these critics has been of some use, I have drawn more on the work of critics who depart from other disciplinary premises such as those of literary and art criticism, sociology and anthropology, history and theology. Among particular examples I would list the following. McCole’s text provides a thorough and well argued account of Benjamin’s career, focusing on his contradictory response to modernity. Pensky’s work on melancholy and Jennings’s discussion of Benjamin’s theory of literary criticism are both valuable contributions that have informed my treatment of these subjects.63 Gilloch’s introduction to Benjamin is lucid and strong on historicization.64 Rochlitz’s analysis of the development of Benjamin’s art-theory is a persuasive reconstruction of the genealogy of themes in Benjamin’s thought.65 Plate’s work has been illuminating in its attempt not to discuss Benjamin as a theologian but rather to look into Benjamin’s work per se for insights into theology.66 Taussig’s anthropological account of the mimetic faculty, which deals

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62 Leslie, Benjamin, pp. 222-23.
64 Gilloch, Benjamin.
65 Rochlitz, The Disenchantment of Art, 1996.
66 S. Brent Plate, Walter Benjamin, Religion and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion through the Arts, London, 2005. Similarly, Reed, rather than looking for Bakhtin’s theology, produces an intriguing
with an extraordinary range of material and is only concerned incidentally with Benjamin, has been an invaluable source of insights, not least in its turning upside down of the commonplace reading of Benjamin’s theory of the aura.67 Perhaps most important of all, Jay’s essay on Benjamin and the novel has backed up two insights that are central to this thesis: first, that Benjamin’s theory of experience (as Erlebnis and Erfahrung) must be understood in the context of the division between (neo-)Kantianism and Lebensphilosophie; and, second, that Benjamin’s notion of ‘experience without a subject’ might fruitfully be compared with Bakhtin’s conception of intersubjectivity.68

As far as comparative studies of Bakhtin and Benjamin are concerned, despite numerous assertions of affinities and similarity and many comments in passing, very little has been written. Sandywell’s essay offers suggestions (such as possible affinities between Benjamin’s concept of translation and Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue or between Benjamin’s concept of messianic redemption and Bakhtin’s concept of ‘great time’) but it operates at such a level of generality and abstraction that its contribution is minimal.69 Eagleton’s treatment of Bakhtin in the context of his study of Benjamin (he devotes in total about thirteen pages of his 179-page study to Bakhtin) is typically provocative but an also typical predominance of rhetorical élan over analytical content limits its usefulness.70 Eagleton is also limited by the fact that Bakhtin’s early works were not available to him at the time of writing. Nevertheless, his work on Benjamin is suggestive in its use of Bakhtin’s conception of carnival to supplement Benjamin’s messianic Marxism and in the concomitant insight that Bakhtin and Benjamin might be brought together on the territory of both Marxism and theology.

68 Martin Jay, ‘Experience without a Subject: Walter Benjamin and the Novel’, in Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead (eds), The Actuality of Walter Benjamin, London, 1998, pp. 194-211. These points are the subject of Chapters 2 and 3 respectively.
70 Eagleton, Benjamin.
Perhaps the most perspicacious study of Bakhtin and Benjamin is the essay by Zima which fastens onto the central similarity between Benjamin's concept of the shock of montage and Bakhtin's concept of carnival laughter. For Zima both phenomena, shock and laughter, are 'liberatory elements of critique whose ambivalence (the joining of incompatible values) constitutes the motor of a discourse both dialectic and dialogic'.

In Zima's analysis, Bakhtin's and Benjamin's key ideas of carnival and polyphony, on the one hand, and shock, montage and the dialectical image, on the other, are brought together in such a way that their analogous structure and function are, at least in part, revealed. Furthermore, Zima makes a serious attempt to link, via the detour of Benjamin's theory of Baudelaire and commodity form, Bakhtin's conception of carnival ambivalence to the workings of capitalism. Despite this, Zima's work has clear limitations since he deals only with Bakhtin's books on Rabelais and Dostoevsky. Additionally, his emphasis on the eternally unfinalizable nature of what he terms Bakhtin and Benjamin's ambivalence is something that I take issue with in my final chapter. Despite these and other contributions, then, this thesis represents, to the best of my knowledge, the most complete attempt at a comparative study of these two thinkers to date.

Pierre [Petr] V. Zima, 'L'Ambivalence dialectique: entre Benjamin et Bakhtine', *Revue d'esthétique*, 1, 1981, 1, pp. 131-40 (136). Zima describes the conception of ambivalence, which he finds in both thinkers and which structures his essay, as follows: 'The obverse of official culture which recognizes only absolute difference and monologue, carnival presents the conjunction of opposites and the plurality of voices: polyphony. [...] In carnival, the absolute difference of values is abolished by the conjunction of opposing values which brings forth laughter. [...] By way of parallel, Benjamin starts out from the notion that opposites touch each other and that their conjunction produces the dialectical shock of recognition and criticism. Shock destroys monovalent contemplation by revealing the ambivalence of reality and the equality (but not identity) of opposing values.' (p. 131)

Zima refers to French translations of Bakhtin. At the time of writing, the other texts translated into French were 'Discourse in the Novel', 'Epic and Novel' and (under the name of Bakhtin) Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. See the bibliographical appendix to Mikhail Bakhtine (V. N. Volochinov), *Le Freudisme*, trans. by Guy Verret, Lausanne, 1980, pp. 214-25.

One might mention in passing Schleifer's study which marshals both Bakhtin and Benjamin, devoting substantial portions of text to a comparison of the two thinkers, in support of an ambitious reassessment of the temporality of the post-Enlightenment age. Confused and inaccurate with relation to both thinkers, Schleifer's work, however, itself confuses and obfuscates the problem. For example, he wilfully misreads out of context Bakhtin's use of the word, 'aura', to imply a point of equivalence between the two thinkers. (p. 211.) Ronald Schleifer, *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science and Culture 1880-1930*, Cambridge, 2000. Cohen's tendentious study, 'a transformative mode of reading I will not quite call
Experience and Form

The opposition of experience and form finds an analogy in the pre-Socratic opposition of *phusis* (nature) and *nomos* (law, custom). This opposition was often, but not necessarily, conceived of in political terms: some, such as Antiphon the Sophist, stress the priority of *phusis*, the necessary nature of things, including the nature of man, over *nomos*, understood as the artificial and even arbitrary laws and customs of the *polis*: ‘for the dictates of the laws [*ta twn nomwn*] are adventitious, whereas the dictates of nature are inescapable; dictates of the laws, based on agreement as they are, are not natural growths, whereas the dictates of nature [*ta ths phusews*], being natural growths, are not based on agreement’.\(^7\)

Others, such as the chorus in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, attempt to assert the binding power of *nomos* over the irregular forces of nature.\(^7\) The distinction between these two spheres in Greek thought reveals a division in the very nature of what it means to be a social human being: it brings into question the adequacy of the shaping forms which human beings devise to make sense of and control a nature which includes their own experience. This division is, perhaps in part, the origin of the homesickness that Novalis claimed to be the fundamental drive of philosophy.\(^7\)

The question of the relation of experience to form is the question of the extent to which human beings are able to recognise themselves in the forms that the particular historical and social moment in which they live makes available to them. It is the question of the extent to which my experience of my own nature (my *phusis*) is reflected in the formally organized world (the world of *nomos*) which surrounds me.


\(^{76}\) ‘Philosophy is really homesickness; it is the urge to be at home everywhere.’ Quoted in Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. by Anna Bostock, London, 1971, p. 29.
Central to the thesis is an understanding of the historically located nature of the relation between experience and form. I argue that Bakhtin's and Benjamin's thought is marked by a sense of the fractured nature of modern experience. This fracturing arises from an historical dislocation of experience from the forms that are designed to enable human beings to make sense of that experience (the forms of habituated social behaviour, tradition, cognition, language, artistic genres, and art *per se*). Thus, for example, Bakhtin and Benjamin, in their thinking on the epic and the story, respectively, are heirs to a sense similar to Hegel's sense of the falling into oblivion of the practice of forms through transformations in concrete social life. Nevertheless, both thinkers seek the seeds of new and productive experience in the new forms that those transformations bring into being.

**Chapter Outlines**

In Chapter 1, 'Habit and Tradition', I examine Bakhtin's and Benjamin's conception of habit and habitualized patterns of behaviour such as ritual and tradition. The question of this chapter is the question of whether such habitual forms represent media for the subject's free self-actualization, rescuing her or him from the mere flux of existence; or whether, on the contrary, these forms represent authoritarian media of alienation in which the subject finds him- or herself objectified.

In Chapter 2, 'Experience', I take an intellectual-historical approach to the relation between experience and form. Taking the ideas of Kant and Hegel as a starting point and ending in the confrontation of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century movements of neo-Kantianism and Lebensphilosophie, I investigate the development of two opposing conceptions of experience in the philosophical tradition: on the one hand, the concrete, subjective and vital experience, opposed to formal regularity, which this tradition terms *Erlebnis*; and,

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on the other hand, the abstract, objective and intrinsically formal experience which this tradition terms *Erfahrung*. The chapter then proceeds to chart both thinkers' articulations of the inadequacy of either conception of experience and their attempts to formulate ways beyond this bifurcation of experience.

Chapter 3, 'Language', examines Bakhtin's and Benjamin's conceptions of language as a possible site of unity of the subjective and objective aspects of experience. Here, I examine the particular varieties of language that Bakhtin and Benjamin suggest might be forms that do not violate the integrity of experience: double-voiced discourse, the polyphony of the novel, translation, montage and, perhaps paradoxically, silence.

Chapter 4, 'Totalities', is devoted to an examination of the place of theories of totality in Bakhtin's and Benjamin's aesthetic theory. In this chapter, I expand on the argument of the thesis as a whole that Bakhtin's and Benjamin's central concern is the question of the closedness or openness of form. Closed forms (epic and monologue, for example, in the case of Bakhtin; the traditional auratic work of art or the Romantic symbol, for example, in the case of Benjamin) provide a completion of experience which fixes experience within the flux of life. Nevertheless, both thinkers argue that closed forms such as these are intimately tied up in social and political hierarchies and result in an objectification of human beings and the world that they inhabit. Bakhtin and Benjamin develop theories of open forms that challenge closedness: dialogue and the novel, in the case of Bakhtin, and translation, allegory, and montage, in the case of Benjamin. These forms promote the preservation of (inter)subjectivity, the dismantling of authoritarian hierarchies and a responsible relationship between the conferring of form and the integrity of experience. This final chapter examines the negatively constructed images of totality contained in these theories. In the context of a discussion of the two thinkers' theology and their politics, this chapter also deals with the temporal orientation of the thinkers' work and the extent to which Bakhtin's and Benjamin's promotion of the openness of form might be provisional positions predicated on a future completion that will come on either the messianic-theological or the political-revolutionary plane.
Selection of Material and Chronology

The oblique angle that this thesis adopts reveals but also conceals. There is much that I have been unable to cover. Among many absences, I have not been able to devote a great deal of space to Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s theories of bodily experience. Benjamin’s concern throughout his work with the integrity of bodily experience is paralleled throughout Bakhtin’s work, from the interest in the wholeness of the body in ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’ through to the counter-tradition of the grotesque body in the Rabelais book. This topic represents a rich seam for future research.

Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s intellectual careers display the development and revision of key themes and ideas. This thesis does not take a strictly chronological approach but it is in tune with Rochlitz’s comments on his own study:

Through the diversity of forms, themes, and conceptions that overlap or succeed one another in Benjamin’s corpus, the reading I propose here will trace a guiding thread. Only such a systematic approach will allow us to discover, behind this multi-faceted critic, the philosopher who remains faithful to a few guiding ideas. Such a search for unity will not be able to avoid resorting to a certain structured periodization.  

I have attempted to convey a sense of structured periodization in my treatment of the two thinkers. The key task in the case of both thinkers is the bringing together of the early works (‘On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy’, and ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, for example, in the case of Benjamin, and *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’, in the case of Bakhtin) with later works which, at first glance, represent direct refutations of these (‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’, for example, in the case of Benjamin, and the essays on the novel, for example, in the case of Bakhtin). In the case of Bakhtin, I have resorted to a rather simple periodization that consists of an early stage (*Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’), a substantial

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78 Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, p. 3.
middle stage (the Dostoevsky book, the essays on the novel, the Rabelais book) and a late stage (represented by the texts collected in *Speech Genres*). The publication and translation history of the Dostoevsky book (and to a lesser extent the Rabelais book) presents an additional challenge to periodization in this study. Nevertheless, because I attempt to demonstrate a complex but coherent structure that underlies Bakhtin's thought in its entirety and that bears comparison with the thought of Benjamin, and *vice versa*, a detailed reconstruction of the complex development of Bakhtin's and Benjamin's thought would not serve my purpose.

I do not pay a great deal of attention to Bakhtin's work on Rabelais. As my comments on carnival in this introduction demonstrate, I have found the Rabelais book problematic; it has, perhaps, been the focus of so much critical study because of Bakhtin's unusual discovery in reverse. Nevertheless, my treatment of Benjamin is also selective. I have not been able to devote much attention to important essays such as 'The Critique of Violence'. Similarly the *Arcades Project* does not figure as greatly here as it perhaps does in the corpus of Benjamin's work. Such absences are, in part, a result of the attempt to draw images of Bakhtin in the light of Benjamin and *vice versa*. They also demonstrate the limits of this study and the great potential for further study that these thinkers provide.

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80 As indicated, Morson and Emerson's *Bakhtin* analyzes in great detail the question of periodization in Bakhtin's work. Coates's book rigorously traces the development of Bakhtin's thought and provides an original rethinking of the generally perceived view in Bakhtin scholarship. For Benjamin, reliable guides are Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, and McCole, *Benjamin*.

81 Other critics demonstrate similar difficulties with the theory of carnival. Morson and Emerson, for example, point out that the dressing up of carnival is a paradigmatic example of an 'alibi-in being', a concept that is heavily condemned by Bakhtin in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Morson and Emerson, *Bakhtin*, p. 95. By discovery in reverse I mean the fact that Bakhtin's later work, such as the Rabelais text, was made known in the West well before his earlier work.
Chapter 1: Habit and Tradition

Habitualization and Avant-garde Aesthetics: Formalism and Brecht

The avant-garde critical movement Russian Formalism wielded a formative influence on Bakhtin and his circle, just as the ideas and person of the German playwright, poet and drama theorist, Bertolt Brecht, played a crucial role in the formation of Benjamin's ideas. Formalism and Brecht, moreover, provide a rare moment where the contemporary intellectual worlds of Bakhtin and Benjamin come into direct contact and the former has an influence on the latter. For it seems that Brecht, on his trip to Russia in 1935, drew directly on the Formalist concept of ostranenie in his formulation of the notion of Verfremdung.\(^1\) Both concepts refer to the action of making strange that which has become familiar and habitual to us, and both concepts compel a reworking of the notion of tradition. Bakhtin's and Benjamin's engagements with Formalism and Brecht, respectively, then, provide a fruitful starting point for this chapter and its themes of habit and tradition.

1. Bakhtin and Formalism

The relationship between the Bakhtin Circle's thought and Russian Formalism is a matter of debate. Medvedev's The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship (1928) is, at one level, a full-blooded attack on Formalism. Nevertheless, the Bakhtin Circle's critique of Formalism has much in common with the object of its attack.\(^2\) At the centre of Formalism project lies the notion of a habitualized and stagnated form of everyday experience encapsulated in the Russian word 'byt'. In his essay on Vladimir Mayakovsky, the Formalists' ally, Jakobson explains the term as follows:

\(^1\) This is a frequent claim, made, for example, by Ewen. Frederick Ewen, Bertolt Brecht: His Life, his Art, his Times, New York, 1992, p. 224. Jameson is more circumspect: 'Brecht offered many definitions of this term [Verfremdung], which seems to have migrated from the "ostranenie" or "making-strange" of the Russian Formalists via any number of visits to Berlin by Soviet modernists like Eisenstein or Tretiakov.' Fredric Jameson, Brecht and Method, London, 1998, p. 39.

Opposed to this creative urge [Mayakovsky’s poetic urge] toward a transformed future is the stabilizing force of an immutable present, covered over, as this present is, by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold. The Russian name for this element is byt.³

Jakobson describes here an opposition between byt, life ossified by habit and ritual, and the creative élan of the poet. It is this opposition between everyday life and artistic activity that defined Formalism. Viktor Shklovsky, in his manifesto of 1914, ‘The Resurrection of the Word’, writes:

By now the old art has already died, but the new has not yet been born. Things have died too: we have lost the sensation of the world. We are like a violinist who has stopped feeling his bow and strings. We have ceased to be artists in our quotidian life; we do not like our houses and clothes and easily part with a life that we do not perceive. Only the creation of new forms of art can bring back to man his experience of the world, resurrect things and kill pessimism.⁴

Or, as he puts it later, in the essay, ‘Art as Device’ (1917): ‘Held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness [...] Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war.’⁵ Everyday life, its social and cultural forms, have, through habitualization, become inadequate to the subjects that live it. This represents a radical disjuncture between subjects and their social and physical environment. Shklovsky looks to art for a renewal of the relationship between cultural forms and life in order to bring a change to this situation.

Art is the means whereby human beings combat the stagnating effects of byt by making the everyday strange:

And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of things through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By ‘enstranging’⁶ objects

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⁶ Sher, in his recent translation, to replace the flawed one of Lemon and Reis, makes a convincing case for rendering ostranenie as ‘enstrangement’ rather than the usual ‘defamiliarization’. I shall
and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious.' The perceptual process in art has a purpose all of its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity.*

This conception of the disrupting and renewing impact of artistic activity on habitualized and automatized experience of life signifies a relation to the European avant-garde movements and their declared rejection of the traditional norms of bourgeois experience and art. It is, moreover, an emphasis that Bakhtin, in large measure, shares. Brandist notes the closeness of Bakhtin to Russian avant-gardists, and their shared view of 'art as a vital activity, in contrast to culture as the dead incrustations on creativity'. Bakhtin shares with the Formalists an awareness of the competition of tendencies towards habitualization and tendencies towards disruption. Tihanov comments:

Both [Bakhtin and the Formalists] conceive the work of art as a system and both deem the destinies of the genre to be shaped by the contest of contrasting metaphysical principles: either by the de/automatization of devices or by the de/centralization of languages and worldviews. [...].

Thus, despite fundamental differences, Bakhtin, like the Formalists, sees art as a medium which is traversed by opposing forces, by habitualization and the breaking of habitualized attitudes.

The Formalist notion of art as defamiliarization demands a reworked conception of artistic tradition. Formalism reconceives literary tradition in terms of the replacement of canonized genres by previously uncanonized genres, a

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7 Shklovsky, 'Art as Device', p. 6.
8 Thus, Breton claims that modern experience is in a cage from which Surrealism will liberate it. '[L’expérience] tourne dans une cage d’où il est de plus en plus difficile de la faire sortir.' André Breton, 'Manifeste du surréalisme' (1924), in *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Paris, 1994, pp. 13-60 (20).
11 Brandist concludes that where Bakhtin 'wished to integrate the worlds of life and culture, the avant-gardists aimed to reintegrate art in life'. Brandist, *The Bakhtin Circle*, p. 39. Similarly, Tihanov writes: 'Bakhtin, however, differs manifestly as regards the substance he fills this matrix with: instead of analysing stylistic devices, he concentrates on the struggle of languages which, unlike the Formalists' understanding of language, are bound up with worldviews and attitudes.' Tihanov, *Master and Slave*, p. 145.
process in which literary inheritance passes ‘not from father to son but from uncle to nephew’. 12 This position, which Jameson describes as a notion of ‘artistic permanent revolution’, 13 constitutes an attack on the view of the stately progress of high cultural tradition, passed down by a cultural and social élite. According to the Formalist view, literary history, conceived of as the history of defamiliarization, is the story of the overturning of hierarchies. Culture preserves its vitality only in combat with that which is taken for granted. Despite the many points of divergence between Formalism and Bakhtin, here is an important point of connection, since this Formalist notion has affinities with the theme of the carnival overturning of social and cultural hierarchies that occupies Bakhtin from the beginning of his work on Dostoevsky and the novel through to the Rabelais book. 14 This idea that that which has become habit, that which is taken for granted and has become what Barthes will later term doxa, is in the favour of the culturally and socially dominant, is also an idea shared, for the most part, by Benjamin, as we shall see below. 15 In this way, combat with habitualization gains political significance.

2. Benjamin and Brecht

When Benjamin met Brecht in 1929 it was the beginning of a friendship that Arendt described as ‘unique in that here the greatest living German poet met the

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14 Gardiner makes a similar point: ‘for what else is carnival, one could argue, if not the recontextualization of existing words and images, thereby “making strange” or “defamiliarizing” them? Carnivalesque mésalliances reveal the arbitrariness of not only established linguistic or literary conventions, but also of a whole range of institutional arrangements and social roles.’ Gardiner, Dialogics of Critique, p. 94.
15 The theme of naturalization into doxa runs throughout Barthes’s work and makes him a thinker with whom both Bakhtin and Benjamin share much common ground. For the connection between Barthes and Bakhtin, see Andrea Lesic-Thomas, ‘Barthes, Bakhtin, Structuralism: a Reassessment’, unpublished PhD thesis, London, 2001. For the connection between Barthes and Benjamin, see Menninghaus, Benjamin’s Theorie der Sprachmagie, pp. 127-31. Menninghaus comments: ‘If one were looking for a motto for Benjamin’s entire enterprise in the philosophy of language and literary criticism, one would scarcely find anything more fitting than Barthes’s confession: “I have always been interested in what one might term the responsibility of forms”.’ p. 128.
most important critic of the time, a fact both were fully aware of. It was also a friendship that was highly unlikely at first glance, one between Benjamin, the retiring, bookish, sensitive philosopher, and Brecht, the irreverent, rude proponent of crude thinking (*plumpes Denken*). Nevertheless, it can be argued that Brecht provided a contemporary and politicized focus for Benjamin’s ideas. McCole notes: ‘it could be said that when [their] paths crossed Benjamin had just spent several years trying to invent him: in Brecht, he found a writer who seemed to step directly into the locus he himself had been working to define since 1925’.

Brecht brought to Benjamin a force of creative destruction, an avant-gardist disdain for tradition and convention and an antidote to Benjamin’s tendencies to habit. Benjamin seems to have felt that Brecht’s aggression and quickness to ridicule (he used to call Benjamin his *Würstchen*) prevented him from succumbing to these tendencies. Brecht’s determination to resist habitualization went to extraordinary lengths. In a diary entry from 1934, Benjamin quotes Brecht’s remarks after a game of chess:

> When Karl Korsch comes, we ought to work out a new game with him. A game in which the pieces do not always stay constant, in which the functions of each piece change after it has stood in the same place for a certain length of time. They would then become either stronger or weaker. At present, there is no development; things stay as they are for too long. (*GS VI* 526; *SW II* 785)

Brecht’s determined orientation towards the future acted as a counter-balance to Benjamin’s nostalgic bent. Benjamin, the collector, the cultural and literary historian, stood in self-professed need to be reminded of Brecht’s maxim: ‘Take

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17 This relationship of considerable psychological complexity has proved difficult for subsequent writers to classify, not least in their attempts to assess the relations of influence and dependency that existed between the two men and thinkers. Critics have often noted the sycophantic tone that Benjamin adopts in his summer diary of his stay with Brecht in Sweden, recording Brecht’s words as if those of a guru, the way in which, at times, in his writings on Brecht, Benjamin seems to adopt the position of a privileged exegete of semi-sacred texts, and finally Brecht’s disparaging attitude towards Benjamin’s writings. For attempts to analyse the Benjamin-Brecht relationship, see McCole, *Walter Benjamin*, pp.195-206; Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, London, 1994, pp. 139-61; and Rolf Tiedemann, “‘Die Kunst, in anderer Leute Köpfe zu denken’: Brecht – kommentiert von Benjamin”, in Walter Benjamin, *Versuche über Brecht*, Frankfurt/Main, 1978, pp. 173-208.

your cue not from the good old things but from the bad new ones’ (*GS VI* 539; *SW III* 340).

In Brecht’s theory of epic theatre Benjamin finds an aesthetic of interruption that destroys habitualized modes of behaviour and perception. He celebrates the development in epic theatre of what he terms the ‘quotable gesture’, the quoting of which rips an action out of its habitual context (*GS II* 535; *SW IV* 305). In Brecht’s notion of *Verfremdung* Benjamin discerns a concept of representation that highlights difference rather than aiming at reproducing the identical, the utopia of Naturalism. The attractiveness for Benjamin of Brecht’s theory of theatre lies in its emphasis on disruption.

This is borne out too by the way epic theatre treats tradition. Brecht’s technique takes well-known historical events or well-known literary material, such as the life of Galileo or the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare, and attempts to show the extent to which events might have turned out differently or might be viewed in a different light. In this approach to history it is clear that Benjamin finds a presentiment of his own view of history developed in ‘On the Concept of History’. The image of history that results both from Brecht and Benjamin is one in which history is not seen as the ordered, predictable, unity of tradition but rather as a fragmented, unpredictable site of disruption.

Benjamin declared himself a partisan of Brecht, his ideas and his literary work, publishing widely and frequently in their support. It follows that the

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19 ‘The task of the epic theatre, according to Brecht, is less the development of actions as the representation of situations. “Representation” here does not mean “reproduction” as the theoreticians of Naturalism understood it. Rather, the truly important thing is to discover the situations for the first time. (One could just as well say defamiliarize them [verfremden].) This discovery (or defamiliarization) of situations is fostered through interruption of the action’ (*GS II* 535; *SW IV* 304).

20 Benjamin comments: ‘“It can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way” – that is the fundamental attitude of one who writes for epic theatre’ (*GS II* 525). Walter Benjamin, ‘What is Epic Theatre [First Version]’, in Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock, London, 1983, pp. 1-13 (8).

21 Typically, Brecht was much less supportive of Benjamin. He does not seem to have read much of Benjamin’s work and what he did read he seems to have responded to with deliberate crassness: Brecht makes the following comments on ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’: ‘[Benjamin] proceeds from something he calls *aura*, which relates to dreams (to
relationship between Benjamin and Brecht is different to that which exists between Bakhtin and Russian Formalism. Nevertheless, the figure and ideas of Brecht seem to function in a similar way for Benjamin’s thought as the traces of Formalism seem to function in Bakhtin’s thought: as a principle of radical dynamism that opposes tendencies towards habitualization. The link between Benjamin and Brecht, on the one hand, and Bakhtin and Russian Formalism, on the other, can be understood not merely at the level of historical fortuity and the possible path from ostranenie to Verfremdung but also at a conceptual level: the level on which exist the themes of habit and tradition.

Habit

1. Bakhtin and Habit

A habit is an activity that has been subjected to a process of formal ordering whereby it is made repeatable. In this chapter, I discuss habit in conjunction with a range of other cognate phenomena such as custom, rhythm, ritual, collecting, and tradition. In these phenomena – which may operate at either the individual or the societal level – the experience of the world receives form: it acquires, to a greater or lesser extent, the attributes of order and repeatability. A concrete example of this is the dirty habit of smoking.

The legend according to which Bakhtin smoked away the only manuscript of his work on the Bildungsroman has been countered by Hirschkop on the grounds that the work itself never existed in any more than the fragmentary form that we possess today. Hirschkop’s secondary argument, however, casts scorn...
on the notion that Bakhtin, 'this most ascetic of scholars was [...] in equal measure casual as regards his texts and passionate about one of life’s more suspect pleasures'. Although he notes Bakhtin’s passion for smoking, Hirschkop’s labelling of smoking as nothing but a pleasurable vice underrates the seriousness of Bakhtin’s smoking.

Smoking, it is fair to assume, was for Bakhtin, as for most smokers, at least as much a ritual as a pleasure in the usual sense. Clark and Holquist refer to the importance of tea and cigarettes to Bakhtin with great frequency in their biography. They write of the problems Bakhtin’s friends encountered in moving the invalid Bakhtin and his wife from Saransk to Moscow:

On the one hand, the Bakhtins had always led a simple and ascetic life, but on the other, their habits were so fixed at this point that there was very little flexibility [...]. Bakhtin drank tea all day which [Elena] insisted on both making and serving herself. She would not agree to using an electrical kettle, so that whatever new accommodations were found would have to provide a stove on which she could boil water.

Aspects of Bakhtin’s life were clearly ruled by habit that had become binding ritual in the midst of his outward asceticism.

It is curious that Clark and Holquist do not pause to comment on Bakhtin’s enslavement to habit. Instead – as in the second, defining, sentence of their book – they concentrate exclusively on Bakhtin’s ‘preoccupation with variety, nonrecurrence, and discorrespondence’. This emphasis is, to a large degree, correct. A revolt against habitualizing modes of thought and behaviour forms a major theme in Bakhtin’s work that spans the different incarnations of his thought. Thus, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* stresses the unrepeatable act in

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Morson and Emerson make a similar point in their comments on habit in Bakhtin: ‘Because of mental habits, intellectual traditions, and centripetal cultural forces, we often lose a sense of the dialogic quality of an event. The live medium becomes dead. [...] Bakhtin uses a variety of terms for this deadening process. In his earliest writings, he calls it “transcription”; later, he speaks of “finalization” and “monologization”, depending on which kind of loss concerns him.’ Morson and Emerson, *Bakhtin*, p. 56.
the face of the habitualized and repeatable transcription of theoreticism; Voloshinov’s work on language argues for the dynamic and unrepeatable nature of ‘theme’ against the static and habitualized nature of ‘meaning’; Bakhtin repeatedly contrasts the open-ended nature of the novel with the habitual nature of the epic, the end of which is always known in advance. This revolt against habit should not, however, be misinterpreted. Keeping an eye on Bakhtin the smoker and Bakhtin the tea-drinker as well as on Bakhtin the champion of the unrepeatability of human activity may serve to keep in focus an essential ambivalence of Bakhtin’s thought that is lost in accounts such as Clark and Holquist’s.

In a passage in his notes from 1970-71, Bakhtin writes:

The rift between real everyday life [byt] and symbolic ritual. How unnatural this rift is. Their false juxtaposition. They say: in those days everyone travelled in troikas with bells, that was real life [byt]. But the carnivalistic overtone remains everyday in life, and in literature it can be the main tone. Pure everyday life is a fiction, and a product of the intellect [‘an invention of intellectuals’ in Hirschkop’s rendering27]. Human everyday life is always shaped, and this shaping is always ritualistic (even if only aesthetically so). (SG 154)

Ritual is a form of behaviour adopted by a society as a collective habit. Bakhtin indicates here the central place of ritual in the midst of life. Far from making a simple opposition between life and habit (here, cast as ritual), Bakhtin asserts their inseparability. Further, he argues that the notion of sheer life is itself a product of abstraction. It follows that the form-giving force of ritual is essential to the creative activity that is life.

Another way of approaching Bakhtin’s ambivalence towards habit is to examine his treatment of the concept of rhythm. The creation of rhythm is the drawing of the irregular and unpredictable activity of the world into regular and more predictable patterns. One need only think of, for example, the role that rhythm plays in the tradition of oral poetry, making verse memorable and habitual to both singers and listeners. In the extensive fragment written in the years 1920-

27 Hirschkop, Bakhtin, p. 265.
24, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', Bakhtin develops a complex notion of rhythm. Here, in so far as the author rhythmicizes the hero’s life, he rescues that life from existential contingency:

In the interior being of another person, when I experience that being actively in the category of otherness, ‘is’ and ‘ought’ (being and obligation) are not severed and are not hostile to each other, but are organically interconnected and exist on one and the same axiological plane; the other grows organically in meaning. His self-activity is heroic for me and is graciously cherished by rhythm (for the whole of him may be in the past for me, and I can justifiably free him from the ought-to-be, which confronts only myself, within me myself, as a categorical imperative) [...]. Rhythm is an embrace and a kiss bestowed upon the axiologically consolidated or ‘bodied’ time of another’s mortal life. Where there is rhythm, there are two souls (or rather a soul and a spirit) – two self-activities; one of these lives and experiences its own life and has become passive for the other, which actively shapes and sings the first. (AH 121)

Bakhtin is making grand claims for the gift of rhythm here which need elucidation.

By rhythmicizing the hero, the author bestows the gift of form on a life, setting it free from the demands of ethical activity. The reference here is to Kant’s moral theory. Kant, unlike Hume from whom the distinction between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ is derived, holds that in our use of reason we unite the spheres of is and ought through obedience to the categorical imperative. This is the permanent task (Aufgabe) of our existence from which we are never absolved. It is, nevertheless, a task that we perform in freedom, since we divine the demands of the categorical imperative by means of our faculty of reason which is the sign of our free will and, in obeying them, we obey ourselves. According to Bakhtin, however, the loving gift of rhythm absolves the hero of this task. It should, however, be clear that this gift comes at the price of his freedom, returning him to the heteronymous sphere of necessity. The kiss of rhythm sets us free from freedom:

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28 Kant discusses the relationships between heteronomy and autonomy, natural necessity and moral freedom in the following words which may help us understand Bakhtin’s ideas: ‘Natural necessity was a heteronomy of efficient causes, since every effect was possible only in accordance with the law that something else determines the efficient cause to causality; what, then can freedom of the will be other than autonomy, that is, the will’s property of being a law to itself? But the
Free will and self-activity are incompatible with rhythm. A life (lived experience, striving, performed action, thought) that is lived and experienced in the categories of moral freedom and of self-activity cannot be rhythmicized. Freedom and self-activity create rhythm for an existence that is (ethically) unfree and passive. [...] To be sure, the unfreedom, the necessity of a life shaped by rhythm is not a cruel necessity... [...] rather, it is a necessity bestowed as a gift, bestowed by love: it is a beautiful necessity. A rhythmicized existence is ‘purposive without purpose’. (AH 119)

This necessity, however, is not the sphere of natural necessity. Rather, rhythmicization raises the hero into the aesthetic sphere of ‘purposiveness without purpose’. Nevertheless, despite the fact that beauty has a symbolic and propaedeutic connection to morality, the beautiful does not lie within the scope of morality and hence is unfree. The rhythmicized life, then, acquires an ambivalent status as an other transfixed in beloved unfreedom.

In the later essay ‘Discourse in the Novel’, (1934-35), Bakhtin returns to the theme of rhythm:

Rhythm, by creating an unmediated involvement between every aspect of the accentual system of the whole (via the most immediate rhythmic unities), destroys in embryo those social worlds of speech and of persons that are potentially embedded in the word: in any case, rhythm puts definite limits on them, does not let them unfold or materialize. (DI 298)

Bakhtin has revised his conception of rhythm here. Stripped of the ambivalence of the earlier formulation, rhythm is death to the plurality of social worlds embedded in language: ‘it destroys them in embryo’. This deadening has the effect of reification, reducing these worlds with their manifold speaking subjects to an inert thing. One might understand this passage in terms of an image: the image of a bud or a seed. The bud is not able to unfold into the multiplicity of the living flower; the seed is unable to germinate into a growing plant. Rather it

proposition, the will is in all its actions a law to itself, indicates only the principle, to act on no other maxim than that which can also have as object itself as a universal law. This, however, is precisely the formula of the categorical imperative and is the principle of morality; hence, a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same.’ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), ed. and trans. by Mary Gregor, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 52-53.


remains a dead seed-head or, indeed, a stone, the same for all eternity in its unproductiveness. Here, then, the habit of rhythm is the mark of a total deadening of the world. Despite this latter image, the ambivalent relationship towards habit (that one can discern across the chronological span of Bakhtin's work) might be what is expressed in the apparent contradiction between Bakhtin's ritualistic smoking and tea-drinking and the revolt against habit in so much of his writings.

2. Benjamin and Habit

It is perhaps strange to associate Benjamin with habit. His was a life of continued interruption, an itinerant life of in part chosen and in part enforced exile and movement. Van Reijen and van Doorn have vividly chronicled the moves between hotel rooms and rented flats in Berlin, Frankfurt, Ibiza, Paris and Moscow, and elsewhere, where Benjamin rarely remained for more than six months at a time. Nevertheless, Benjamin's obsessive nature and his preoccupation with habit are to be seen in both his life and his work. Adorno writes in an essay reminiscing about his friend:

[Benjamin's] private demeanour at times approached the ritualistic. In the letters this ritual element extends to the graphic image, indeed even to the selection of writing paper; during the period of emigration his friend Alfred Cohn continued a longstanding practice of presenting him with a specific grade of paper. Benjamin's ritual behaviour was most pronounced in his youth, and only towards the end of his life did it begin to relax.

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32 As one of Benjamin's aphorisms has it: 'If the smoke from my cigarette and the ink from the nib of my pen flowed with equal ease, I should be in the Arcadia of writing' (*GS IV* 112-13; *SW I* 263). Benjamin was also punctiliously observant of the rituals of politeness. Lisa Fittko, a German refugee who accompanied Benjamin on the trek over the Pyrenees to Port-Bou, the site of his suicide, gives her account of Benjamin's last days: "'Gnädige Frau,' he said, "please accept my apologies for this inconvenience." The world was coming apart, I thought, but not Benjamin's politesse." Lisa Fittko, 'The Story of Old Benjamin', in *GS V*, pp. 1184-94 (1185), in English in the original.

Benjamin’s practice of and philosophical interest in collecting bears witness to his tendency to act on the basis of habit. Collecting is a matter of obsession and a ritualized form of habit, just like smoking and tea-drinking. Collecting grew into a passion during his preparatory work for *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as Benjamin bought from antiquarian book-sellers, often at ruinous cost, the seventeenth-century allegory books that were to form the core material of that work. The concern with collecting as a phenomenon to be studied runs throughout Benjamin’s work from his interest in the Baroque preoccupation with collecting symbols and allegories, through the passage on stamp-collecting in *One-Way Street*, through the essays, ‘Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian’ and ‘On Unpacking my Library’, to the *Arcades Project*, the sprawling notes for a work on nineteenth century Paris that Benjamin began in 1927 and never completed. In the *Arcades Project*, the reader confronts a document that is at once a disquisition on collecting – the mania for collecting that is exhibited in the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior and in the seductive piling of commodity upon commodity in the Paris arcade – and simultaneously a monument of collecting itself: a store of quotations and sources, laboriously copied out by hand into vast lists during long hours in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. Similarly, Jameson has discerned in Benjamin’s writings on modern art an underlying emphasis on the habit and the ‘rhythm of recurrences’:

Thus even in Proust and Baudelaire, who lived in relatively fragmented societies, ritualistic devices, often unconscious, are primary elements in the construction of form: we recognise them in the ‘vie antérieure’ and the correspondences of Baudelaire, in the ceremonies of salon life in Proust. And where the modern writer tries to create a perpetual present – as in Kafka – the mystery inherent in the events seems to result not so much from their novelty as from the feeling that they have merely been forgotten, that they are in some sense ‘familiar,’ in the haunting sense which Baudelaire lent that word.

The ability to synthesize habit in the midst of modern disorder and create the appearance of familiarity is a hallmark of Benjamin’s artistic heroes.

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34 For a full treatment of the theme of collecting in Benjamin’s writings, see Wolfgang Schlüter, *Walter Benjamin: Der Sammler und das geschlossene Kästchen*, Darmstadt, 1993.

With Benjamin’s concern with ritual and habit, however, coexists an ever-present emphasis on their other: shock and disruption. For habit deadens experience. In his ‘Berlin Chronicle’ (1932), Benjamin, reminiscing about his childhood experience of the city, writes: ‘Let no one think we were talking of a Markt-Halle. No: it was pronounced “Mark-Talle”, and just as these words were eroded by the habit of speech until none retained its original sense, so by the habit of this walk all the images it offered were worn away’ (GS VI 475; SW II 603). Benjamin champions childhood experience for its capacity to see everything as new, for its pre-habitual nature. He similarly champions Surrealism for its potential, through the ‘profane illumination’ of chance and unconscious energies, to disrupt the habitualized experience of modern life. It is the power of cinema to jolt the viewer into new ways of experiencing the world and to destroy, through shock, the aura that Benjamin celebrates in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’. It is the power of montage to bring deadened objects into new and revitalized constellations.

Benjamin’s attitude to habit, like Bakhtin’s, contains a high degree of ambivalence. Caygill notes that, in ‘On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy’, Benjamin warns of the conflation of the notions of freedom and experience:

This confusion [of freedom and experience] can occur in two ways, both of which threaten to qualify the concept of freedom to the point of abolishing it. The first reduces freedom to empirical experience by stripping it of any transcendental qualities while the second removes freedom from experience by making it purely ideal and far removed from the spatio-temporal world. [...] Benjamin’s adumbrated speculative concept of freedom/experience discerns freedom in the rhythms and patterns as well as the warps and distortions of experience.

I read this as arguing that, for Benjamin, the habit of rhythm and patterns and the disruption of life must be arranged in ways that preserve the continuum of freedom and experience. Neither habit (Caygill’s ‘rhythms and patterns’) nor its opposite (the ‘warps and distortions of experience’) is sufficient alone. As far as

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36 Henceforth, referred to in the text as ‘The Work of Art’. See my comments below on the versions of this text and their dates.

collecting is concerned, it is worth noting that the figures of the collector and the
destructive character in Benjamin’s writings stand in antinomical relation to each
other. In ‘The Destructive Character’ (c1931), Benjamin notes that the collector
finds solace in the apparent order that habit discovers in the midst of disorder: ‘for
what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself
to such an extent that it can appear as order?’ (GS IV 388; SW II 486-87). The
destructive character, however, represents the antithesis of habituation and exists
in an environment that is the opposite of the collector’s book-lined interior: ‘The
destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one
activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any
hatred’ (GS IV 396; SW II 541). Thus habit and destruction, the collector and the
destructive character, are dialectically dependent on each other.

Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s conceptions of habit are ambivalent. Yet only an
awareness of these forms of ambivalence can accomplish what proves otherwise
to be a difficult task: the reconciliation of two seemingly incompatible models in
the thought of both thinkers. In the case of Bakhtin, these are the championing of
consummation in the early texts and the championing of dialogic dynamism in
later texts. In the case of Benjamin, these are the celebration of auratic, traditional
experience in texts such as ‘The Storyteller’ and the celebration of the destruction
of the aura in ‘The Work of Art’.

The major difference between Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s approach to
habitualization lies in the differing development of their thinking. In the case of
Benjamin, it is possible to discern positive and negative evaluations of different
forms of habit simultaneously throughout his career. Most strikingly, ‘The
Storyteller’ (published October 1936) and the second version of ‘The Work of
Art’ (written December 1935-February 1936), which seem to present diverse
evaluations of habit, are composed more or less simultaneously. 38 In the case of

38 The first version of ‘The Work of Art’ was published in the journal of the Institute for Social
Research in 1936. At Horkheimer’s instigation from the Institute’s headquarters in New York,
Benjamin’s text was significantly altered by the toning-down of its overtly Marxist terminology.
The second version of ‘The Work of Art’ represents the version in which Benjamin intended to
see the essay published. The third version, widely known because of its inclusion in collections of
Bakhtin, one finds a shift from a qualifiedly positive evaluation of certain forms of habit or rhythm in the early texts to a far greater emphasis on the breaking of habitualization in the later work, and finally a guarded rehabilitation of habit in the late notes. This assessment is, however, merely a general assessment of the shape of Bakhtin's thought. It is clear that the early concern with the power of habitual form to provide a refuge from existential flux leaves its trace in the later writing. These traces are visible, above all, in Bakhtin's seemingly paradoxical contention that the novel, whilst being the antithesis of all other genres, an anti-genre, is nevertheless a genre, that is to say a form-giving gesture, rather than a principle of formlessness.39 Bakhtin's and Benjamin's ambivalent attitudes to habit express their quest for ways in which human experience and cultural forms can be brought together in relations that are appropriate to each other. This quest may entail the use of flexible tactics.

One way to understand Bakhtin's and Benjamin's thinking on the relation between habit and disruption is to understand their positions as historically situated in a specific modernity, and hence provisional and tactical. Hirschkop thinks along these lines in his discussion of the question of relativism in Bakhtin. Arguing that to see in Bakhtin's theory of novelizing discourse the essence of all language leads to a conception of Bakhtin as a proponent of pure relativism, Hirschkop contends that:

What [such a view] misses is the political meaning of a historicizing and relativizing discourse when it opposes a discourse that presents itself as timeless, natural, and self-evident; dialogism, in its novelistic form, is itself defined by its opposition to monologism. Bertolt Brecht's strategy was roughly similar: to dismantle a naturalizing ideology, one opposed it with a discourse which historicized life, revealing it as something produced and therefore changeable.40

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Benjamin's essays after his death, was composed in either in the spring of 1936 or April 1939. It reflects Adorno's criticisms and comments. My references are to this third version.

39 Bakhtin comments: 'The novel, after all, has no canon of its own. It is, by its very nature, not canonic. It is plasticity itself' (DI 39). Todorov notes that Bakhtin's description of the novel amounts, in this sense, to a 'contradiction of the very notion of genre'. He also points out Bakhtin's debt in this conception of the novel as the modern anti-genre to the early German Romantics and to Friedrich Schlegel in particular. Tsvetan Todorov, Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle, trans. by Wlad Godzich, Minneapolis MN, 1984, p. 86. Tihanov makes the similar comment that the novel's 'generic identity is paradoxically couched in terms of non-identity and constant modification'. Tihanov, Master and Slave, p. 145.

40 Ken Hirschkop, 'A Response to the Forum on Mikhail Bakhtin', p. 76.
This passage usefully reveals Bakhtin’s affinities with Brecht, Benjamin’s political and intellectual ally, and, thus, by association, accords with my arguments for affinities between Bakhtin and Benjamin. It also points out, however, that Bakhtin’s celebration of the disruption of the novel is the result of the nature of that disruption’s historically located target. This corresponds to Buck-Morss’s suggestion that Benjamin evaluates the loss of the aura in different ways according to what it affects: positively in regard of the work of art; negatively in regard of people. Buck-Morss thus implies that Benjamin’s evaluation of this phenomenon is not absolute but tactical and provisional. If this understanding of Bakhtin and Benjamin as tactical and flexible thinkers is correct, or at least admissible, it follows that an examination of the different targets is needed, hence my next section which deals with the variety of forms of habit.

3. Different Forms of Habit: Tradition and Modernity

It is possible to distinguish two different forms of habitualized and habitualizing behaviour that coexist and contend with each other in modern society. The first, one might term the tyranny of custom and authority. This applies to received, hierarchically valorized cultural forms that naturalize certain ways of viewing the world. In the face of these static and closed practices, Bakhtin and Benjamin seek out resources of resistance: what one can describe as dynamic openness, in the case of Bakhtin, and shock, in the case of Benjamin. In Bakhtin, the tyrannical force of custom is represented by the suffocation of dialogue in traditional genres or courtly culture. In Benjamin, it is to be seen in the authority of aura, for example, or the Schein of the symbol in the book on Trauerspiel.

The second form of habitualization is brought into being by the abstracting and rationalizing modes of thought and behaviour associated with modernity and with the mode of calculation engendered by a capitalist society geared towards

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42 I discuss this in detail in the final chapter.
exchange-value. This universalizing approach to the world abstracts from the particular its particularity, thereby erasing the differentiated nature of experience and reducing experience to an endlessly repeated series of repeatable phenomena. In both the early Bakhtin and the early Benjamin, this form of habitualization is often associated with Kantianism. It is at the heart of Voloshinov’s critique of Saussure. In the later Benjamin it is associated with the ‘eternally the same’ (das Immer-gleiche) of commodity production; in the later Bakhtin, with modern monologism.

Bakhtin’s awareness of these two possible sources of habit reveals a profound ambivalence towards modernity. The novel draws its essential dynamism and open-endedness from its relation to modernity. In ‘Epic and Novel’ (1941), Bakhtin speaks of the novel as ‘the vanguard of change’ (DI 33), whose modernity is ‘indestructible, and verges on an unjust evaluation of the times’ and which develops its full potential only in the modern world (DI 31). Nevertheless, in the Dostoevsky book he notes that this openness and dynamism is threatened by two sources of habitualization: on the one hand, the source of habit that is tradition, and on the other hand, by tendencies towards habitualization that are inherent in modernity itself:

The consolidation of monologism and its permeation into all spheres and ideological life was promoted in modern times by European rationalism, with its cult of a unified and exclusive reason and especially by the Enlightenment, during which the basic generic forms of European artistic prose took shape. [...] Semantic unity of any sort is everywhere represented by a single consciousness and a single point of view. This faith in the self-sufficiency of a single consciousness in all spheres of ideological life is not a theory created by some specific thinker; no, it is a profound structural characteristic of the creative ideological activity of modern times, determining all its external and internal forms. (DP 82)

The novel must combat both the habit that it inherits from the epic and also specifically modern habits (some that the novel may acquire in its combat with

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43 Tihanov notes the problem in Bakhtin’s analysis of the historical place of Dostoevsky that arises from Bakhtin’s identification of both monologism and dialogism as expressions of modernity: ‘Rather than appear as the product of specific capitalist developments affecting the fate of a particular class in Russia, Dostoevsky’s oeuvre now has to be interpreted as the rejection of an all-pervasive and vague cultural pattern.’ Tihanov, Master and Slave, p. 194.
tradition, for the novel ‘is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review’ (*DI* 39)) that represent a permanent threat of remonologization. For, if monologism of this sort has come to be a ‘structural characteristic’ of modern ways of thinking, then it has only come to dominate by processes of habitualization. Bakhtin makes this connection clear at the end of the Dostoevsky book: ‘We must renounce our monologic habits so that we might come to feel at home in the new artistic sphere which Dostoevsky discovered, so that we might orient ourselves in that incomparably more complex *artistic model of the world* which he created’ (*DP* 272). And yet, Bakhtin’s ambivalence towards habit persists in so far as the demand that we should come to ‘feel at home’ (osvoit’ sia) suggests new and more benign forms of familiarity and habitualization.

Benjamin’s attitude to habit is also an indicator of his ambivalent attitude to modernity. By way of example we may take Benjamin’s treatment of the concept of ritual. Rituals are, as I have already argued, patterns of behaviour that have become established over long periods of time until they have become part of habit. In ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ (1939), Benjamin describes the traditional amalgam of experience that is preserved by ritual:

> Where there is experience [*Erfahrung*] in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine in the memory with material from the collective past. Rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals [...] kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime. (*GS I* 611; *SW IV* 316)

Furthermore, as the continuation of the quotation implies, ritual forms part of the world of the storyteller and hence is explicitly linked to the mode of production which is craftsmanship:

> A story does not aim to convey an event *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather it embeds the event in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience [*Erfahrung*] to those listening. It thus bears the trace of the storyteller, much as the earthen vessel bears the trace of the potter’s hand. (*GS I* 611; *SW IV* 316)

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Here, in the traditional and transmissible world of the storyteller, the cycles of ritual and the rhythm of traditional forms of production, such as the repetitive coiling of a pot by hand or the turning of the potter's wheel, embed the human being into an organic social and physical world. The whole of the person is preserved in all her or his actions. His historical being, his life, is preserved in transmission of the social material that is the story. His physical being, his body, is preserved in the marks that his hands leave in the clay. The story he tells is the same as the story he has heard but also slightly different because of the timbre of his voice and his individual turns of phrase. The repetition of manual production results not in identity but in difference as each earthen vessel will bear slightly different marks, making each pot an authentic and original expression of the whole being of its maker.

In contrast to this image, later in the essay, Benjamin describes the experience of the worker in the modern factory:

In working with machines, workers learn to co-ordinate ‘their own movements with the uniformly constant movements of an automaton’. [...] ‘All machine work,’ says Marx in the same passage cited above, ‘requires prior drilling [Dresseur] of the worker.’ This drilling must be differentiated from practice [Übung]. [...] The unskilled worker is the one most deeply degraded by machine drilling. His work has been sealed off from experience; practice counts for nothing in the factory. (GS I 631-32; SW IV 328-29, translation modified)

This is habit of a different form. The regular whirring of the machine is not a human rhythm. Dresseur (a term normally used for animals and soldiers) implies that the worker is the passive object of an activity, not its subject as would be the case in Übung. The worker’s physical experience of his work is also different. Rather than leaving his physical traces on the material world, the material world leaves its traces on him as he is transformed into part of the machine itself.45 His

45 This image makes one think of the opening scenes of Fritz Lang’s 1927 film, Metropolis, in which a group of workers stands in front of an enormous machine, pulling levers. As the machine speeds up, the workers are forced to jerk their limbs faster and faster. Eventually, an accident occurs and many of the workers are killed. From the point of view of the hero of the film who witnesses the events, the machine is transformed into the face of a giant monster, which the hero identifies with the Semitic god, Moloch, and which devours the workers in the fiery furnace which it has in place of a mouth. I can find no evidence that Benjamin saw this film. Nevertheless, I am certain that Benjamin would have agreed with Lang’s association of the capitalist mode of production and technology with archaic, cultic violence. More obviously, Benjamin draws here on
social being is also annihilated in so far as experience that can be narrated is absent. The repetition of mechanical reproduction produces total identity, which relates nothing and tells no stories. Benjamin, then, outlines here two different forms of habit: a traditional form of ritualistic and rhythmic habit in which the full subject-nature of the human being is integrated and preserved, and a modern technological form of habit in which the subject is alienated and reduced to an object. Put simply: traditional habit is a phenomenon which we shape as well as receive, and in which we express our full being; modern habit is something that we fall slave to. This is what Benjamin means when he writes of the bourgeois interior: ‘the intérieur forces the inhabitant to adopt the greatest number of habits – habits that do more justice to the interior he is living in than to himself’ (GS II 217; SW II 734).46

The position that I have just described, however, represents only one part of Benjamin’s attitude to modernity. Elsewhere, as in ‘The Work of Art’, Benjamin thinks in a different vein:

As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals – first magical, then religious. And it is significant that artwork’s aural mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function. In other words: the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the source of its original use value. This ritualistic basis, however mediated it may be, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty. [...] for the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual. [...] But as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics. (GS II 217; SW IV 256-57)

46 In this essay, ‘Experience and Poverty’, Benjamin opposes the cluttered bourgeois interior, stuffied full of collected objects, to the Modernist, glass building of Loos and Le Corbusier that is more exterior than interior and whose functional minimalism is hostile to the collecting of objects.
In this essay Benjamin argues that ritual, in its original cultic forms as well as in its secularized courtly, exhibition and aesthetic forms, is a source of authority. Auratic works of art are embedded in rituals that operate within strict social hierarchies. So, magic rituals are dependent on the power of the magician; religious, on the hierarchy of the priesthood; courtly, on the institution of the Crown; exhibition, on the critic; aesthetic, on the poet. In this ritualistic hierarchy, the work of art wields power over its perceivers. This power is gained from the distance, historical, spatial and hierarchical, that separates it from its perceivers. The distance of ritual ensures that the work of art and the hierarchy within which it is embedded are perceived as untouchable and unchangeable. The result is a perfect tradition of repetition that is authoritarian.

In Benjamin's historical schema, this process of seamless, authoritarian tradition is disrupted by the development of techniques of reproduction, or rather, more correctly, by the orientation of art towards its reproducibility:

It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the

47 Stoessel comments on Benjamin's formulation that the aura is 'die einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne so nah sie sein mag' (the unique appearance of a distance no matter how close it may be), noting that the word einmalig contains a number of senses: 'Einmalig has a double meaning: the appearance of aura does not last, and it is unrepeatable [...]. It is independent of the conscious will of the subject. What appears may well appear again, but it cannot be captured by the subject or be consciously conjured up again'. Marleen Stoessel, Aura: Das vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin, Munich, 1983, p. 47, quoted in Charles W. Haxthausen, 'Reproduction/Repetition: Walter Benjamin/Carl Einstein, in October, 107, Winter 2004, pp. 47-74 (54). This is another way in which the aura exerts power over the perceiver.

48 Mieszkowski's comments are useful in elucidating the point that Benjamin is making, but does not elaborate in great detail, about social and political hierarchies of perception: 'Benjamin attempts to explain the aura in terms of an artwork's "authenticity, " the here and now of the work, its singular existence. The viewer of the artwork does not, however, bask in the unmediated revelation of its presence. Rather Benjamin describes an encounter with the authority that the work's presence acquires from its position in the highly ritualized network that organizes models of tradition and cultural heritage. [...] In these terms, the experience of the authenticity of the work of art is as much a factor of how the presence of the work is framed or situated as it is an immediate experience of that presence; it is in essence a social experience, and for this reason is always open to a political cooption over which the individual viewer may have little control.' Jan Mieszkowski, 'Art forms', in David S. Ferris, The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 35-53 (39-40).

49 Whilst Benjamin notes that tradition may be 'itself thoroughly alive and extremely changeable' (GS I 480; SW IV 256), in auratic transmission, the 'authenticity of a thing' and its 'historical testimony' remain untouched (GS I 477; SW IV 254).
reproduction to reach the recipient in his own situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the present crisis and renewal of humanity. Both processes are intimately linked to the mass movements of our day. (GS I 477-78; SW IV 254)

According to Benjamin’s argument, it is exactly those mechanical processes of production that he is so critical of in ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ and ‘The Storyteller’ that destroy the authoritarian power of tradition. Furthermore, the exact repetition of sameness that takes place in modern techniques of reproduction such as the rotary-press results in the production of difference: replacing a unique existence with a plurality of exact reproductions produces a plurality of possible appropriations by a multitude of receivers. The distance of tradition is broken down by the reproduction which travels across temporal, spatial and hierarchical boundaries to meet the perceiver in her or his specific location. In this process, the authoritarian frameworks of tradition are exploded. The perceiver ceases to be the passive recipient of a closed and unquestionable tradition, but, rather, becomes the active appropriator and reactivator of culture. This is the transformation of the ritualistic basis of art into a new form of democratic politics, for here is the link with the ‘mass movements of our day’ of which Benjamin speaks. Here, then, is the ambivalence of modernity: modernity’s new, authoritarian habits of commodity production, those that result in the ‘present crisis of humanity’ and whose negative effects we have seen in the essay on Baudelaire, are at the same time the liberating forces that enable a new and freer relationship to a once authoritarian tradition that, in the process of the establishment of this relationship, is both shattered and renewed.

Strangely, however, this revolutionary shattering of the habits of tradition is dependent on the creation of new forms of habit. This statement needs some explanation. Among the habit-breaking effects that Benjamin attributes to the impact of film, the phenomenon at the core of ‘The Work of Art’, is the cinematic opening up of what Benjamin terms the ‘optical unconscious’. The montage technique of film with its new perspectives and its ability to slow down and dissect reality reveals to us new, hidden details of what had previously been
familiar to us. What was previously unconsciously habitualized becomes conscious. As Taussig puts it, through the opening of the optical unconscious ‘we become aware of patterns and necessities that had previously ruled our lives’. Later in the essay, however, Benjamin, having ascribed such revolutionary power to the optical and habit-breaking possibilities of film, appears to contradict himself. Commenting on the fact that in our perception of architecture it is the tactile and unconcentrated activity of habit that is equally important in our reception of a building as optical reception, Benjamin states:

For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed purely by optical means - that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually – taking their cue from tactile reception - through habit. Even the distracted person can form habits. What is more, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their performance has become habitual. The sort of distraction that is provided by art represents a covert measure of the extent to which it has become possible to perform new tasks of apperception. (GS 1 505; SW IV 268)

This new form of habit which will be necessary for resolution of the ‘tasks which face the human apparatus of perception’ will bear a curious similarity to the old, integrated form of habit that I have described above in relation to the storyteller: its tactility links it to the bodily integrity of the figure of the storyteller. The same is true of distraction: Benjamin has argued earlier in the essay that the viewer of film, the mechanically reproducible medium par excellence, develops an attitude of distraction. The element of distraction is also present in the storyteller who distractedly tells his tale whilst working at the wheel or loom.

Far from being diametrically opposed, as some critics have claimed, it is now possible to see the common ground between Benjamin’s position in ‘The

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50 This notion is closely related to the defamiliarization/Verfremdungseffekt of the Formalists and Brecht.
51 Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 25.
52 The importance that Benjamin lends to distraction is evidence of his debt to Brecht’s theory of epic theatre. Compare Benjamin’s ‘What is Epic Theatre’ with Bertolt Brecht, ‘Das moderne Theater ist das epische Theater’, in Schriften zum Theater, Frankfurt/Main, 1977, pp. 13-28.
53 Benjamin comments of the world of storytelling where those who listen are also those who retell: ‘the more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory’ (GS II 447; SW III 149).
Storyteller' and his position in 'The Work of Art'. Orientation towards mechanical reproducibility shatters authoritarian tradition. Its new habits, however, revive certain features of integrated habit that modernity itself seemed to have destroyed.

Automatic and authoritarian habits have to be replaced by new habits in which the old quality of distraction reappears and ensures a critical stance. The opposite of distraction is cultic possession such as when a sacred song 'possesses' its singer, a notion that is analogous to Bakhtin's idea of possession by rhythm in 'Discourse in the Novel'. Distraction (Zerstreuung) is a term that bears much of Benjamin's ambivalence about habit. Distraction is a condition of habit formation. We have mastered a process when we can perform it 'without thinking about it'. Distraction is also, however, what happens when habits are disturbed and interrupted by something new or something that momentarily appears unfamiliar. 'Distracted habit' is then the synthetical concept that conjoins Benjamin's sense of positive, integrated habit and his sense of the needs for disruption and newness.

The creation of new habits, furthermore, is a vital and political task. Once again Taussig's comments are useful:

Habit offers a profound example of tactile knowing and is very much on Benjamin's mind, because only at the depth of habit is radical change effected, where unconscious strata of culture are built into social routines as bodily disposition. The revolutionary task [...] could thus be considered as one in which 'habit' has to catch up with itself. The automatic pilot that functions while asleep has to be awakened to its own automaticity, and thus go traveling in a new way with a new

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54 So Wolin: 'The exuberant acceptance of the process whereby traditional aesthetic genres are sacrificed to the all-encompassing onslaught of rationalization, characteristic of "The Work of Art" essay, a process credited with opening up tremendous, heretofore untapped possibilities for the political employment of art, is a sentiment totally absent from "The Storyteller". In the Leskov essay, Benjamin has come round to a diametrically opposite assessment of this trend.' Wolin, Benjamin, p. 224.
55 Gilloch discusses this sense of the term, 'possession', in Benjamin's thought. See Gilloch, Benjamin, pp. 183-84.
56 Gilloch makes a similar point in Gilloch, Benjamin, pp. 190-91. Eiland also comments: 'The opposition now would seem to be between mere distraction and, shall we say, productive distraction - between distraction as a skewing of attention, or as an abandonment to diversion, and distraction as a spur to new ways of perceiving.' Howard Eiland, 'Reception in Distraction', in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), Benjamin and Art, pp. 3-13 (9).
As Taussig implies, the somaticity of habit means that this new form of critical attitude will carry revolutionary intensity. Benjamin writes in his essay on Surrealism (1929):

The collective is a body, too. And the *physis* that is being organized for it in technology can, through its political and factual reality, only be produced in that image sphere to which profane illumination initiates us. Only when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*. (GS II 310; SW II 217-18)

For this to happen, habit must be deployed; there must be complex processes of destruction of the authoritarian habits of certain forms of tradition which also involve the renewal of other forms of integrated habits. 'Distracted habit' takes on political import.

In the position that reveals itself through a consideration of the sum of these essays, we can see that Benjamin's thinking contains a similar structure to that of Bakhtin. Both thinkers have a similar view of the processes of repetition that inhere in life: repetition must produce difference not identity. We have seen above that Benjamin is against those forms of habit in which repetition results in the production of sameness and in favour of those forms of habit in which

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58 In the context of a discussion of Marx's aesthetics, Eagleton provides a useful insight into what might be meant by this sort of 'body politics': 'Marx is most profoundly 'aesthetic' in his belief that the exercise of human senses, powers and capacities is an absolute end in itself, without need of utilitarian justification; but the unfolding of this sensuous richness for its own sake can be achieved, paradoxically, only through the rigorously instrumental practice of overthrowing bourgeois social relations. Only when the bodily drives have been released from the despotism of abstract need, and the object has been similarly restored from functional abstraction to sensuously particular use-value, will it be possible to live aesthetically.' Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, London, 1990, p. 202. Benjamin's point reverses the chain of causes: bodily innervation is itself a necessary source of revolutionary energy. Hitchcock uses Eagleton's reading of Marx's aesthetic politics to argue for the political and materialist orientation of Bakhtin's aesthetics in Peter Hitchcock, 'The World according to Globalization and Bakhtin', in Brandist and Tihanov (eds), *Materializing Bakhtin*, pp. 3-19 (10-13). The point of convergence between Bakhtin and Benjamin on this matter might be that both think that aesthetics and politics must fully integrate the body.
59 There is an echo here of Erasmus' comment in the *Diliculum*: 'Clavus clavo pellitur, consuetudo consuetudine vincitur' (one nail is driven out by another nail; habit is overcome by habit).
repetition results in the production of difference. In Bakhtin's conception of language in the Dostoevsky book we find an analogous view:

‘Life is good.’ ‘Life is good.’ Here are two absolutely identical judgments, or in fact one singular judgement written (or pronounced) by us twice; but this ‘twice’ refers only to its verbal embodiment and not to the judgement itself. We can, to be sure, speak here of the logical relationship of identity between two judgments. But if this judgment is expressed in two utterances by two different subjects then dialogic relationships arise between them (agreement and affirmation). (DP 183-84)

Bakhtin resists the abstracting and reductionist viewpoint that sees, in apparent regularities of experience, logical relationships of identity rather than plurality and difference. He seeks out the seed of difference within the context of repetition and apparent identity. For both Bakhtin and Benjamin, a habit that reduces the world to identity is to be rejected in favour of forms whose apparent regularity nevertheless produces difference. Difference-producing repetition may be seen, like Benjamin’s distracted habit, as another synthetical unity of habit and its opposite.

There are, however, major differences between the two thinkers. In the essay ‘The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology and the Human Sciences’ (1959-61), Bakhtin addresses mechanical reproduction:

Natural uniqueness (for example a fingerprint) and the semantic (signifying) unrepeatability of the text. All that is possible for a fingerprint is mechanical reproduction (in any number of copies); it is possible, of course, to reproduce a text in the same mechanical way (i.e. reprinting), but the reproduction of the text by the subject (a

60 In the context of a discussion of Benjamin’s theory of mimesis, Leslie suggests a precedent for Benjamin’s theory of different sorts of imitation: ‘In the Kritik der Urteilskraft Kant makes a distinction between two types of imitation: “nachfolgen” and “nachahmen”. The first type of imitation is creative, the second merely reproductive.’ Leslie, Benjamin, p. 117. This concept may also be a precedent for Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s ideas of repetition. There are also echoes of Bakhtin and Benjamin in the later French tradition. In their attitude to repetition, Bakhtin and Benjamin reveal a proximity to both Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze. As Weber comments of Lacan: ‘The processes studied by psychoanalysis almost always involve repetition, not however as a return of the same, in any simple sense, but rather as the recurrence of a difference separating that which is repeated from its repetition.’ Samuel Weber, Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan’s Dislocation of Psychoanalysis, Cambridge, 1991, p. 5. Lacan understands his own ‘retour’ to Freud as a repetition that produces difference. Similarly, Deleuze consistently argues that difference and repetition are linked in their hostility to the notion of identity. See Ronald Bogue, Deleuze and Guattari, London, 1989, pp. 45-80. One might argue that Bakhtin, Benjamin and Deleuze coincide in their resistance to the hegemony of identity.
return to it, a repeated reading, a new execution, a quotation) is a new unrepeatable event in the life of the text, a new link in the historical chain of speech communication. (SG 106)

Bakhtin’s more technical focus on the linguistic nature of the text means that he stops one step short of the conclusion drawn by Benjamin: that the process of mechanical reproduction can, in itself, create new subject positions which represent new executions and new unrepeatable events in the life of the artwork. Benjamin’s response seems to emanate more directly from experience of the effect of mechanical reproduction, Bakhtin’s more from linguistic theory. Despite this, essential similarities remain between the two thinkers: within modernity there are opposing forces: on the one hand, modernity contains the sources of practices that can liberate subjects from a passive slavery to habit; on the other hand, there are opposing tendencies that lead to new, and yet more authoritarian habits of passivity. And yet, finally there may well be a need to create new forms of habits and to feel at home in a new sort of world. Where the two thinkers seem to differ, however, is in Benjamin’s more dialectical insistence that it might be in the very debased nature of the modern world (here, commodity production) that one might find sources of resistance to authoritarian practices, whether of the traditional or modern variant. As Benjamin puts it in another context: ‘And it is at the scene of the limitless debasement of the word – the newspaper, in short – that its salvation is being prepared’ (GS II 629; SW II 742). In my final chapter, I argue that there is less of a gulf that separates Bakhtin and Benjamin on this point than might appear here.

**Tradition and Authority**

It should be clear from my discussion of Benjamin’s attitude to ritual and pre-modern and modern habits that another way of talking about the set of themes raised under the heading of habit is to examine questions of tradition. After all, tradition might be defined as the historically transmitted habits of a collective. As we have seen, in Benjamin’s writings the opposition of habit and the breaking of habit can be mapped onto another (perhaps more fundamental) opposition of tradition and destruction: the tradition of the storyteller versus the destruction of
tradition by mechanical reproduction, for example. The aspect of Benjamin’s thought that is concerned with tradition has received a fair degree of attention from critics. In Bakhtin scholarship, the theme of tradition does not seem to be common. Nevertheless, it is my contention that at the heart of both writers’ thought is a meditation on the relationships between tradition, transmissibility and authority.

Benjamin’s conception of tradition is unusual in that he emphasizes the necessary reliance of tradition not on conservation but on destruction. McCole notes: ‘What [Benjamin] meant by “tradition” was less a particular canon of texts or values than the very coherence, communicability, and thus the transmissibility of experience.’ Transmissibility demands that the recipient of tradition is able to integrate the objects of tradition into her or his experience. This is the difference between the tradition of the storyteller and the authoritarian tradition of the aura, described above. In the first case, as I have shown, tradition is integrated into the person of the recipient and continuator of tradition, changing in the process; in the second, the hierarchical distance does not allow the integration of the person and tradition becomes an authoritarian transmission of identity. This second form of tradition is what Duttmann describes when he states that ‘a tradition which would have already set its standards once for all time would be one which delivered itself to oblivion’. Such a form of tradition destroys the very essence of tradition which consists in transmissibility. In the face of this form of tradition, it follows

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61 The extreme poles of Benjamin’s thought are to be found in the study of Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften (composed 1919-22) and in the essay, ‘Experience and Poverty’. In the former, Benjamin argues that the destruction of tradition does not result in emancipation and a clearer vision of the world, but rather in new forms of blindness: ‘Where does their freedom lead those who act in such a manner [who break with tradition – TB-M]? Far from opening new perspectives for them, it blinds them to the reality that inhabits their fears’ (GS I 132; SW I 303). In the latter, Benjamin asks us, in the words of Brecht’s slogan, to ‘Erase the traces!’ as part of a new Barbarism.

62 Arendt neatly expresses the relationship between tradition and authority: ‘Insofar as the past has been transmitted as tradition, it possesses authority; insofar as authority presents itself historically, it becomes tradition.’ Arendt, ‘Introduction’, p. 43.

63 McCole, Benjamin, p. 2.

64 Alexander Garcia Duttmann, ‘Tradition and Destruction: Walter Benjamin’s Politics of Language’, in Andrew Benjamin and Osborne (eds), Benjamin’s Philosophy, pp. 32-58 (45). Duttmann’s article discusses Benjamin’s conception of destruction and tradition in relation to the essays ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’ and ‘The Work of Art’ and with a particular focus on the fight against fascism. He also sets these themes into the context of a discussion of the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot.
that, in the name of tradition, tradition must be destroyed: hence the dialectic of
destruction and tradition that runs through Benjamin’s work. Benjamin’s search is
for a tradition that will not destroy experience; or, put in other terms: a search for
cultural forms that do not destroy life.

Bakhtin’s view on tradition reveals some similar themes. Bakhtin deals
with tradition in his essays of the 1930s and 1940s on the nature of novel. In
‘Epic and Novel’, he writes:

Let us move on to tradition. The epic past, walled off from all
subsequent times by an impenetrable boundary, is preserved and
revealed only in the form of national tradition. [...] By its very nature
the epic world of the absolute past is inaccessible to personal
experience and does not permit an individual, personal point of view
or evaluation. One cannot glimpse it, grope for it, touch it; one cannot
look at it from just any point of view; it is impossible to experience it,
analyze it, take it apart, penetrate into its core. It is given solely as
tradition, sacred and sacrosanct, evaluated in the same way and
demanding a pious attitude toward itself. (DI 16)

Immediately it is possible to see features of Bakhtin’s conception of tradition that
are analogous to Benjamin’s view of the authoritarian tradition of the aura in the
‘The Work of Art’. ‘Discourse in the Novel’ had already outlined a similar
conception. Here, like aura, the tradition of epic is characterized by a distance
that is established between the objects of tradition and its recipient. First, the
distance is hierarchical insofar as it demands our piety. Moreover, this hierarchy
is also social in nature since the authoritative word is ‘indissolubly fused with its
authority – with political power, an institution, a person’ (DI 343). Second, this
hierarchical distance is temporal: the inaccessibility of the epic is the result of its
belonging to the walled-off past of the ancestors and in this sense is equivalent to
Benjamin’s aura, which is dependent on the unique historical testimony of the
artwork. For Bakhtin, too, the authoritative tradition of the epic is reliant on
cultic forms of ritual that elevate the work into a sacrosanct sphere, just as is the
case in Benjamin’s analysis of auratic works. Furthermore, epic tradition, like the
aura, denies a physical integration of the object: ‘one cannot grope for it, touch it’.
Finally, it denies a plurality of individual perspectives, for, Bakhtin argues, the
epic word ‘enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one
must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it' (DI 343). The epic word thus reduces the individual to a passive recipient and reduces subjects to objects.  

Just as Benjamin contends that the increasing orientation towards mechanical reproducibility is an historical process of the destruction of the authoritarian hierarchies of aura, so Bakhtin argues that the historical development of form contains an antidote to the distance and self-sufficiency of epic forms: 'In the history of literary language, there is a struggle constantly being waged to overcome the official line with its tendency to distance itself from the zone of contact, a struggle against various kinds and degrees of authority. In this process discourse gets drawn into the contact zone' (DI 345). His champion in this struggle is the polyphonic novel and the various forms of language consciousness which give rise to it from their birth in the Menippean satire and the Hellenistic romance, through the carnival form of Rabelais, to their full development in the polyphony of Dostoevsky.

Central discrepancies appear between Bakhtin's view of the historical struggle between the authoritative word of the epic and the forces of novelness and Benjamin's materialist account of the relationship between modes of production and the organization of perception in relation to works of art. The first major discrepancy is to be seen in the two thinkers' understanding of causality. Bakhtin's understanding of the struggle between epic and novel, dialogism and monologism, is an agonistic and almost Manichaean encounter between two forces which, at times, seem to move through history in a decidedly

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65 Hirschkop comments: 'The problem with authority, so far as Bakhtin is concerned, is not that it shuts people up, presents the false as true, or imposes an otherwise neutral language on downtrodden subjects; the problem with authority or power is that it distorts the natural intersubjectivity of language, giving us meaning without voices.' Hirschkop, Bakhtin, p. 87.

66 Benjamin's materialism is, nevertheless, far from convincing and certainly not very dialectical or orthodox Marxist. Criticisms of this kind form an important part of Adorno's approach to Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire in the Adorno/Benjamin correspondence, 1936-38. The key letters of the exchange are collected in Bloch et al., Aesthetics and Politics, pp. 110-14. Nägłe has made a careful analysis of Benjamin's materialism in relation to the Adornian negative dialectics of the Frankfurt School and Brechtian method, conducted largely through a biographical prism. Rainer Nägłe, 'Body Politics: Benjamin's Dialectical Materialism between Brecht and the Frankfurt School', in Ferris (ed.), Companion to Benjamin, pp. 152-76.
idealist fashion. Benjamin, in contrast, puts his faith in the effects of developments in the mode of production and, more specifically, in technology. As he had already written in 1927 in an article that formed part of a public controversy over Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*, 'the vital, fundamental advances in art are a matter neither of new content nor of new forms — the technological revolution takes precedence over both' (*GS II* 753; *SW II* 17). The second major discrepancy is between Benjamin's orientation towards visual perception and Bakhtin's towards language. This discrepancy is, perhaps, more serious than the first. Whereas in the first it is possible either to make explicit material and historical determinations which Bakhtin only implies, or to minimize the determinist appearance of Benjamin's account, the distance between perception and language is harder to bridge. As a possible solution one might appeal to the fact that Bakhtin's use of the term 'language' is itself close to the notion of an ideological 'world-view'. Nevertheless, alongside these discrepancies, central similarities also appear in the ways in which the counter-forces of the novel and mechanical reproduction affect tradition.

In a central passage of 'Discourse in the Novel', Bakhtin opposes the 'authoritative discourse' of tradition to the 'internally persuasive word' which is characteristic of the novel. Authoritative discourse, as we have seen, is defined by its closedness within a hierarchical context of distance. The internally persuasive word, on the other hand, is defined by:

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67 Speaking of these two forces, Tihanov comments: 'Bakhtin never attaches a clearly defined social group or class to either force, any more than he presents the concrete historical dynamics of this conflict, and this makes for the metaphysical resonance of his account.' Tihanov, *Master and Slave*, p. 143.

68 Geulen has argued against an understanding of 'The Work of Art' as a piece that describes a materialistically and technologically determined process, reading it instead as a programmatic piece: 'One ought to view the text less as a description than as the production of a crisis in art. The essay on the work of art is not a descriptive text, not an analysis of the status quo. Rather its theses are themselves the result of that which, in a purely thematic perspective, appears to be its program.' Eva Geulen, 'Under Construction: Walter Benjamin's “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”', in Richter (ed.), *Benjamin's Ghosts*, pp. 121-41 (123). Hirschkop discerns a similar oscillation between description and prescription in Bakhtin's theory of dialogue, as I note later. Leslie has also argued strongly against what she terms a 'techno-determinist' reading of Benjamin. Her arguments, based on the distinction that Benjamin makes in the second version of the essay between a 'first' and 'second' *Technik*, are convincing. Nevertheless, the appearance of material and technological determination, which undoubtedly exists in Benjamin, continues to set him apart from the appearance of metaphysics in Bakhtin. See Leslie, *Benjamin*, pp. 161-62.
semantic openness to us, its capacity for further creative life in the
context of our ideological consciousness, its unfinishedness and the
inexhaustibility of our further dialogic interaction with it. We have
not learned from it all it might tell us; we can take it into new
contexts, attach it to new material, put it in a new situation in order to
wrest new answers from it, new insights into its meanings, and even
wrest from it new words of its own. (DI 346)

The internally persuasive word, then, opens up the closedness of traditional
language, just as the sensibility of mechanical reproducibility, a sensibility
marked by a 'sense of the universal equality of things', wishes to 'pry an object
from its shell, to destroy its aura' (GS I 479; SW IV 255-56, translation modified).
Like mechanical reproduction, the internally persuasive word draws the object
into the 'familiar zone of contact'; in this 'zone of familiar contact' and in the
physical implication of the term 'contact', as opposed to in opposition to the
untouchability of the authoritarian word, we see Bakhtin's concern with the
somatic aspect of the breaking of tradition, a concern that is analogous to
Benjamin's. This zone of contact is also the site of an opening up of the
singularity of tradition into the democratic plurality of new meanings. Bakhtin's
new contexts, new answers and new insights in the quotation above are the
counterpart to the effect of Benjamin's mechanical reproduction which
'substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence' and which permits the object
of tradition to 'reach the recipient in his own situation', hence reactivating the
object. Finally, just as I have argued that, for Benjamin, mechanical reproduction
reactivates the subject nature of the perceiver, so, for Bakhtin, the internally
persuasive word does not treat its recipient as an object but rather as a co-equal
subject with the capacity to answer back. It is 'half ours and half someone else's'
(DI 345). The internally persuasive word of the novel allows its recipient to enter
into dialogue with it as an equally affirmed subject.

For Bakhtin, as we have seen, the constitutive feature of authoritative
discourse is its historical distance; for Benjamin, the aura is reliant on its historical
testimony. Both mechanical reproduction and the internally persuasive word of
the novel bring the object of tradition into the zone of contemporaneity. Bakhtin
writes:
The internally persuasive word is either a contemporary word, born in a zone of contact with unresolved contemporaneity, or else it is a word that has been reclaimed for contemporaneity; such a word relates to its descendents as well as to its contemporaries; what is constitutive for it is a special conception of listeners, readers, perceivers. (DI 346)

In the case of mechanical reproduction this is effected by the ability of the perceiver to take the mechanically reproduced work into his or her historical context. The creation of an expanded present is also a constitutive feature of cinema, just as the present of a dialogized interaction of voices is a constitutive feature of the novel. Benjamin notes the extent to which the montage of film presents things that in fact occur at different times as simultaneous events: 'a leap from a window, for example, can be shot in the studio as a leap from a scaffold, while the ensuing fall may be filmed weeks later at an outdoor location' (GS I 491; SW IV 261). The simultaneity towards which Benjamin’s theory of montage strives is a spatialized zone in which everything is possible and nothing has been decided in advance. The creation of spatialized simultaneity is also the goal of the polyphonic novel of Dostoevsky. This is Bakhtin’s concept of the threshold - the present conceived of not as the minimal passing point between past and future, but rather as a moment of decision which expands to fill space and hence can contain a plurality of perspectives:

Dostoevsky attempted to perceive the very stages themselves in their simultaneity, to juxtapose and counterpose them dramatically, and not to stretch them out into an evolving sequence. For him, to get one’s bearings on the world meant to conceive of all its contents as simultaneous, and to guess at their interrelationships in the cross-section of a single moment. (DP 28)

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69 The simultaneity of montage is another variant of Benjamin’s notion of ‘dialectic at a standstill’. For this connection, see Geulen, ‘Under Construction’, p. 131. Andrew Benjamin treats Benjamin’s notion of simultaneity and his ‘opening of the present’ in Andrew Benjamin, ‘Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger showing the Present’, in Benjamin and Osborne, Benjamin’s Philosophy, pp. 216-50. The spatialization of time which is treated by both Benjamin and Bakhtin is also an important feature of avant-garde poetics, since it is both a revision of tradition and a site for the reformulation of the subject. The founding gesture of simultaneity as an aesthetic principle is perhaps Apollinaire’s ‘Zone’ where ‘mêmes les automobiles ont l’air d’être anciennes’. Guillaume Apollinaire, ‘Zone’ (1913), in Alcools, London, 1993, pp. 39-44 (39). For the importance of an aesthetic of simultaneity to the Avant-garde, see Peter Nicholls, Modernism: A Literary Guide, London, 1995, pp. 112-24.
Here we begin to see the kinship between Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony and Benjamin’s theory of montage which I discuss in more detail in chapter 3. Interrelationships in the cross-section of a single moment are exactly what montage technique creates by ripping fragments out of temporally and spatially diverse contexts and reassembling them in a juxtaposition of equality. For the time being, however, I will only state that the simultaneity of Bakhtin’s novel and Benjamin’s montage serve the same purpose: they both disrupt the stately temporal progress of a tradition where, in Düttman’s formulation above, everything has been determined in advance, and replace it with a spatialized present, pregnant with multiple possibilities.

The novel’s and film’s cutting up of the seamlessness of tradition can be viewed in another way. In ‘The Work of Art’, Benjamin draws an analogy between the activity of the cameraman and the surgeon, on the one hand, and the activity of the painter and the magician, on the other:

The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The attitude of the magician, who heals a sick person by a laying on of hands, differs from that of the surgeon who makes an intervention in the patient. The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated; more precisely, he reduces it slightly by laying on his hands, but increases it greatly by his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient’s body, and increases it only slightly by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. Magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue. The images obtained by each differ enormously. The painter’s is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer consists of multiple fragments, its

70 Osborne also notes the similar temporal and spatial logic of the novel and of montage: ‘And if, as Bakhtin argued, all literary genres have increasingly been subject to novelization as a process of linguistic familiarization and the creation of a certain semantic open-endedness, so, we might argue, all genres of communication (including the novel) have subsequently been subject to cinematization, the logic of montage and the image, and an intensification of that “revolution in the hierarchy of times” whereby “the present becomes the center of human orientation in time and in the world”, which Bakhtin associated with the novel.’ Peter Osborne, The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde, London, 1995, p. 197. Leslie also implies an affinity between Benjamin’s theory of montage and Bakhtin, as well as noting that montage is an assault on habit. She writes: ‘Two seemingly dissimilar things, word and image, are forced together in a montage, clashing and dialogically relaying back and forth. [...] This unfamiliar perspective [of montage], as imagined by the Russian constructivists, freezes the real, protecting it from habit and alienating the alienated.’ Leslie, Benjamin, p. 60.
manifold parts being assembled according to a new law. (GSI 495-96; SW IV 263-64)

Once again, we see the breaking down of hierarchical (and, here, specifically, cultic) distance. The surgeon delves into the patient's body. To the magician, the body is a whole that cannot be penetrated. The surgeon shows it to be an assemblage that is constituted of organs. His clinical intervention in the body reveals that the seemingly closed unity of the body is the result of a coming-together of many different things, heart, brain, spleen and muscles.

The effect of an orientation towards mechanical reproducibility, then, is to penetrate the surface of things and to reveal their essentially plural constitution. This is also the effect of novelistic discourse. The opposite of novelistic discourse, for Bakhtin, is poetry which entails a negation of the plural nature of language: 'the poet strips the word of other's intentions' (DI 297). The language in a poetic work is a 'unitary and singular Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing exists and nothing else is needed. The concept of many worlds of language, all equal in their ability to conceptualize and to be expressive, is organically denied to poetic style' (DI 286). The novel, by contrast, reveals the fundamentally plural nature of language as the interrelation and intersection of many individual and social languages and voices:

The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types [raznorečie] and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speech of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships. (DI 263)

Like the surgeon/cameraman penetrating the body/the visual world, the novel penetrates into the complexity of the interrelated and interpenetrated world and represents it as a plurality rather than the false, abstracted, closed unity that is the object of poetry. Its constitutive language are utterances in which languages interpenetrate: double-voiced discourse, irony, stylization, the internally persuasive word, and so forth.
The explosion of the apparent unity of tradition with the revelation that the world consists in plural interpenetration, however, is more than the mere shattering of tradition. In Bakhtin’s view, poetry’s sloughing of the traces of all languages other than its own is a mortification of living language. It produces the word as an inert thing: ‘Discourse lives, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse toward the object; if we detach ourselves from this impulse all we have left is the naked corpse of the word [...]’ (DI 292). This is exactly what poetry does, according to Bakhtin. Removing the word from the complex interaction of many languages in social life, it kills the word itself. It follows, then, that whilst the novel may be a bitter enemy of tradition, the effect of novelization is the revitalization of the word, that is to say of the essence of tradition: transmissibility. This, then, is Bakhtin’s version of the notion of the destruction of tradition that ends up renewing it.

Counter-traditions and the Task of the Critic

By way of a conclusion to this chapter, one might ask what alternative to authoritarian tradition Bakhtin and Benjamin propose. It is certainly not newness for newness’s sake. I have made clear enough the degree of ambivalence of Bakhtin and Benjamin towards the disrupting forces of modernity. Moreover, their central concern for the transmissibility of culture would prevent such a conclusion. The tendency of total newness – total difference, as one might term it – results only in the white noise of absolute intransmissibility. Furthermore, Bakhtin and Benjamin can both be characterized as cultural historians. Their interests do not lie in a wholesale jettisoning of the past. Rather, I contend that Bakhtin and Benjamin both may be seen to have as one of their underlying aims the establishment of various counter-traditions.

We see Bakhtin’s construction of a counter-tradition in, *inter alia*, the chapter on ‘Characteristics of Genre’ in the 1963 version of the Dostoevsky book, in the essays on the novel of the 1930s and 1940s, in particular ‘From the

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71 This is despite Benjamin’s scathing assertion in *One-Way Street* that ‘the critic has nothing in common with the interpreter of past cultural epochs’ (GS IV 108; SW I 460).
Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse' (1940), and in the Rabelais book. Here, a wide variety of cultural phenomena – Menippean satire, the Hellenistic romance, folk culture and Rabelais, and, of course, Dostoevsky himself – are presented as an alternative, vibrant counter-tradition to the authoritarian forms of official culture. This is a counter-tradition in which all the qualities of somaticity, intersubjectivity, familiar contact, dialogue and so forth, which I have discussed above, are preserved and transmitted. This is a form of anti-tradition which, in opposition to official tradition, preserves the essence of transmissibility.

In Benjamin's work one can find something analogous to Bakhtin's construction of a counter-tradition. In ‘Discourse in the Novel’, Bakhtin describes two lines of the novel’s development, one of which, often overlooked and neglected, leads to Dostoevsky. In the second version of ‘What is Epic Theatre?’ (1939), Benjamin similarly describes two traditions of drama, one of which leads to Brecht:

Plato long ago recognized the undramatic quality of that most excellent man, the sage. In his dialogues, he took this figure to the threshold of the drama; in his *Phaedo*, to the threshold of the Passion play. The medieval Christ who also represented the wise man [...] is the untragic hero *par excellence*. But in Western secular drama, too, the search for the untragic hero has been unceasing. In ways that are ever new, and frequently in conflict with its theoreticians, this drama has differed from the authentic – that is ancient Greek – form of tragedy. This important but poorly marked road, which may serve here as the image of a tradition, wound its way through the Middle Ages in the works of Roswitha and the mystery plays, and through the Baroque period in the works of Gryphius and Calderón; later it can be traced in Lenz and Grabbe, and finally in Strindberg. Scenes in Shakespeare are its roadside monuments, and Goethe crosses it in the second part of *Faust*. It is a European road, but a German one as well – if indeed we can say that the legacy of medieval and Baroque drama has reached us by a road, and not by some obscure smugglers’ path. It is this mule track, neglected and overgrown, which in our day comes to light in the dramas of Brecht. (*GS II* 534; *SW IV* 303-04)

Benjamin’s attempts to construct a counter-tradition are not, however, confined to a legitimization of Brecht. His life’s work can be construed as an attempt to wrest from historical obscurity and false readings a whole range of historical cultural phenomena in which he discerns the expressions of subjectivities that are
continuously threatened with objectification and in danger of being forgotten. We see this in his reading of the neglected body of Trauerspiel against the grain of the hegemony of standard post-Romantic readings; in his attempt in the Wahlverwandtschaften study to wrest Goethe from the Georgist vitalism of Wundt; in his attempt to bring Schelling and Novalis out from under the shadow of Kant and Hegel in his work on the German Romantics; in his loving lament for the disappearing and overlooked figure of the storyteller; and in his location of the revolutionary potential of the cinema. This approach to tradition and counter-tradition is summed up in ‘On the Concept of History’:

Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was’. It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. (GS I 695; SW IV 391)

Benjamin’s imperative that one wrest tradition from conformism lest its content and its heirs become tools of the ruling class is an approach that Bakhtin’s work also adopts.

This reference to Benjamin’s writing on the task of the historian might help us understand the ontological status of the counter-traditions which he and Bakhtin construct. In the case of Bakhtin, the question might be put bluntly: are we really to believe in the existence of a counter-tradition that bubbles beneath the mainstream of monologic, official culture, surfacing occasionally in Menippean satire, Rabelais and Dostoevsky? The answer is, surely, no. To believe in such a thing would be as crazy as to believe in the narrator of Eco’s Foucault’s Pendulum, Casaubon, and his construction of an occult tradition of ‘telluric currents’ in Europe running from Ancient Egypt, through the Templars, Rosicrucians and Masons, right up to the dimensions of the modern Paris.

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telephone kiosk. Such counter-traditions are constructed by critics like Bakhtin. To say this, however, is not to devalue the act of construction. The act of construction is the intervention of the historian who has the gift of ‘fanning the spark of hope in the past’ (GS I 695; SW IV 391).

To make sense of this it is necessary to examine Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s conceptions of criticism. In the case of Benjamin, one finds a highly developed notion of the role of criticism. Much of this is to be found in ‘The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’. Here, Benjamin elaborates a literary theory on the basis of the German Romantics, Novalis and Schelling, in which criticism is the guarantor of the continued life of the artwork:

Criticism [Kritik] when confronting the work of art is like observation when confronting the natural object [...] Thus, criticism is, as it were, an experiment on the artwork, one through which the latter’s own reflection is awakened, through which it is brought to consciousness and to knowledge of itself. (GS I 65; SW I 151)

It follows from this that, far from being a secondary and parasitic phenomenon in relation to the work of creation, criticism is a necessary ‘completion’ of the work and, paradoxically, stands prior to it. This ‘completion’, however, does not mean putting an end to the work, dotting its i’s and crossing its t’s, but rather drawing it into a continuing after-life of ever-repeated and self-renewing interpretation. Given this elevated role, criticism is productive not reactive, and this applies as much to the whole tradition of literature as it does to the individual work. As Comay puts it:

Abandoning its traditional legitimating or legislative role, Romantic criticism instead comes to realize itself as an inexhaustible process of supplementation of the individual work through the repetitive recycling of prior texts. Schlegel explicitly links such ‘unceasing, repeated reading’ to the very possibility of tradition. [...] For Schlegel, the ‘essence of critique’ is to link history and philosophy through the reconstruction, reinterpretation, and retransmission of lost, damaged,

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74 Benjamin, with the Romantics, seems to assert that criticism stands prior to literature. In this recognition Benjamin and the German Romantics pre-empt the reversal of the traditional prioritization of author and critic by French thinkers such as Roland Barthes whose ‘birth of the reader’ might better be glossed as the ‘birth of the critic’ who makes the scriptible text possible. See Roland Barthes, ‘La Mort de l’auteur’, in *Le Bruissement de la langue: Essais critiques IV*, Paris, 1984, pp. 63-69.
incomplete, inaccessible or otherwise absent (neglected, unread, unreadable) objects.\textsuperscript{75}

Given this notion of criticism, it is possible to understand how the conscious construction of counter-traditions becomes the foremost task of the critic; the critic must be able to discern the overgrown smugglers' paths which run alongside the broad highway of official tradition.

Bakhtin has a much less developed conception of criticism. Nevertheless, in 1970 in his 'Response to a Question from the Novyi Mir Editorial Staff', he sketches a conception of criticism that bears similarities to Benjamin's. Bakhtin shares with Benjamin a rejection of historicism:

\begin{quote}
Trying to understand and explain a work solely in terms of the conditions of its epoch alone, solely in terms of the conditions of the most immediate time, will never enable us to penetrate into its semantic depths. Enclosure within the epoch also makes it impossible to understand the work's future life. \textit{(SG 4)}
\end{quote}

Rejection of the explanation of the work 'solely in term of the conditions of its epoch' parallels Benjamin's rejection of historicism's 'the way it really was'. Historicism 'completes' the work in the bad sense of restricting it to its own historical epoch and of cutting it off from its future life. What Bakhtin seems to have in mind is rather a criticism which supplies the work with a constantly renewed source of life, as in Benjamin's and Schlegel's sense of 'completion':

\begin{quote}
Great works continue to live in the distant future. In the process of their posthumous life they are enriched with new meanings, new significance: it is as though these works outgrow what they were in the epoch of their creation. [...] [Shakespeare] has grown because of that which has actually been and continues to be in found in his works, but which neither he himself nor his contemporaries could consciously perceive and evaluate in the context of the culture of their epoch. \textit{(SG 4)}
\end{quote}

It is the role, then, of the critic to be attentive to the ever-growing semantic richness of the great work, giving it life in his or her own time, rather than consigning it to oblivion:

\textsuperscript{75} Rebecca Comay, 'Benjamin and the Ambiguities of Romanticism', in Ferris, \textit{Companion to Benjamin}, pp. 134-51 (140).
Semantic phenomena can exist in concealed form, potentially, and be revealed only in semantic cultural contexts of subsequent epochs that are favourable for their disclosure. The semantic treasures Shakespeare embedded in his works were created and collected through the centuries and even millennia: they lay hidden in the language [...]. (SG 5)\textsuperscript{76}

What Bakhtin describes as a feature of the passage of great works through time also implies an imperative for the critic. The critic must uncover what has remained hidden, unleash potential, carefully wipe off the obscuring dust of time from the treasure, thereby revealing new facets visible only to the critic in the present.\textsuperscript{77}

Benjamin makes a similar point in ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1924):

For in [the work’s] afterlife – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process. The obvious tendentiousness of a writer’s literary style may in time wither away, only to give rise to immanent tendencies in the literary creation. What sounded fresh once may sound hackneyed later; what was once current may someday sound quaint. To seek the essence of such changes, as well as the equally constant changes in meaning, in the subjectivity of posterity rather than in the very life of the language and its works – even allowing for the crudest psychologism – is to confuse the root cause of a thing with its essence. (GS IV 12-13; SW I 256)

From his or her later historical position, the task of the translator (or indeed the task of the critic, for Benjamin’s conceptions of translation and criticism are

\textsuperscript{76} In one of his fragments, Benjamin makes a similar point: ‘The survival of artworks should be represented from the standpoint of the struggle for existence. Their true humanity consists in their unlimited adaptability’ (GS VII 678; SW III 141).

\textsuperscript{77} It is possible to discern here the influence of late Formalist theories of literary evolution and their notion that great works’ survival through time can be attributed to their formal complexity which enable repeated processes of deautomatization. See J. N. Tynjanov, ‘On Literary Evolution’ (1927), in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds), Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views, Cambridge MA, 1971, pp. 66-78. Bakhtin is particularly close here to Mukařovský’s notion of the renewal of the literary series. See Jan Mukařovský, ‘Estetická funkce, norma a hodnota jako sociální fakty’, in Studie I, ed. by Miroslav Červenka and Milan Jankovič, Brno, 2000, pp. 81-148. Many areas of connection between Bakhtin and Mukařovský still need to be fully explored, Mukařovský’s conception of dialogue not least among them. Holquist’s brief treatment of the matter thoroughly misrepresents Mukařovský’s thought for the sake of preserving the ‘unique brilliance’ of Bakhtin. See Holquist, Dialogism, pp. 57-59. Undoubtedly, however, Bakhtin’s ‘Response’ should also be seen as a contemporary engagement with the Structuralism of the Tartu School.
intimately linked\textsuperscript{78}) is to release the living tendencies immanent in the work, what Bakhtin describes as concealed semantic phenomena. In so doing the translator/critic revives the work and rescues it from oblivion, not by virtue of mere historical changes in the socio-linguistic context, but by virtue of the living essence that has been slumbering in the work.\textsuperscript{79}

At this point, it is worth juxtaposing an image that Benjamin draws in the essay, ‘The Storyteller’:

In the fourteenth chapter of the third book of [Herodotus’] \textit{Histories} there is a story from which much can be learned. It deals with Psammenitus. [...] This tale shows what true storytelling is. The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing itself even after a long time. [...] Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is utterly dry. That is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable, after thousands of years, of provoking astonishment and reflection. It is like seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the airtight chambers of the pyramids and have retained their germinative power to this day. (\textit{GS II} 445-46; \textit{SW III} 148)

A critic like Bakhtin and Benjamin must not see the stone façade of the mausoleum, but must penetrate the tomb and find in it the seed of grain that lies overlooked in the corner. Recognizing it as a seed, not mistaking it for a stone, he must allow it to germinate and come to life; it must, under his attentive gaze and in his loving hand, be drawn from the past into the present so that it can break out of the singular, inert and closed form of exterior and unfold into plural, living and open meanings.

\textsuperscript{78} Benjamin describes criticism as ‘another, if a lesser, factor in the continued life of literary works (\textit{GS IV} 15; \textit{SW I} 256)’. His comments on the translations of the Romantics in this essay point back to ‘The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’.

\textsuperscript{79} It is here that Bakhtin and Benjamin depart, at least in emphasis, from the late Formalist and Czech Structuralist view of literary evolution which, whilst arguing that the semantic and structural complexity of great works is an important factor in their capacity for artistic survival, tends to put greater emphasis on the historical and social context of reception as the necessary background for re-defamiliarization. Once again, it is Mukařovský who comes closest to Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s position. In his work of the 1940s, Mukařovský rehabilitates the notion of intentionality in (Czech) Structuralist literary history, thereby diminishing what had previously been seen as the overriding importance of the context of reception. Jan Mukařovský, ‘Záměrnost a nezáměrnost v umění’, in \textit{Studie I}, pp. 353-88.
In his 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death' (1934), Benjamin examines this notion of unfolding:

The word 'unfolding' has a double meaning. A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper. This second kind of unfolding is really appropriate to parable; the reader takes pleasure in smoothing it out so that he has the meaning on the palm of his hand. Kafka's parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom. That is why their effect resembles poetry [Dichtung]. (GS II 420; SW II 802-03)

The image of tradition that emerges from a consideration of this quotation in conjunction with the passage about Herodotus might illuminate Bakhtin's and Benjamin's understanding of tradition and the critic's construction of counter-tradition. Authoritarian tradition reduces plurality to unity in the manner of the second example of didactic unfolding, where the complexly constituted turns into the flatness of the sheet of paper. Bakhtin's and Benjamin's critical counter-traditions are designed to unfold the cultural objects of the past in the first sense, the way a bud turns into blossom. In 'Author and Hero', we encounter a similar image; in intersubjective encounters, the other must not be reduced to a closed, dead object but rather must be enabled to blossom into living subjectivity. In this context, Bakhtin writes: 'The excess of my seeing [vis-à-vis the other] is the bud in which slumbers form, and whence form unfolds like a blossom' (AH 24).
Chapter 2: Experience

Diachronic Contexts from Hegel to Lebensphilosophie

In the previous chapter, I have explored the ambivalence of Bakhtin and Benjamin towards forms of habit and cognate phenomena such as ritual, tradition, and so forth, and their adequacy to the task of preserving the integrity of experience. In the nineteenth century, however, the influential figure of Hegel had been positive about the benefit, indeed the indispensability, of such customary cultural and social forms for the free development of the individual's subjectivity.

In the second part of Elements of the Philosophy of Right (1822), Hegel launches a sustained attack on Kant’s resolution of the problem of what Hegel terms ‘abstract freedom’. Like Kant, Hegel argues that abstract freedom – the unconstrained freedom to do what we want – is illusory, since in acting according to our individual desires we are in thrall to those desires. Similarly, Hegel also argues that freedom is to be achieved in the acting out of our duty: ‘I should do my duty for its own sake, and it is in the true sense my own objectivity that I bring to fulfilment in doing so. In doing my duty, I am with myself [bei mir selbst] and free.’ Against Kant, however, Hegel argues that the fulfilment of one’s duty towards an abstractly conceived categorical imperative is not sufficient for the realization of the individual’s freedom. Rather, Hegel contends, such a conception of freedom in duty towards an abstract rational imperative pits reason against desire and hence denies human beings the happiness produced by the satisfaction of their natural desires.

Hegel’s solution to this problem is ingenious and one in which the habits of cultural and social forms play a crucial role. He argues that unity of individual satisfaction and freedom can only be found in conformity to the social ethos and customs of the organic community. In the organic community individual desires and needs are shaped by social custom and hence the satisfaction of those needs

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and desires benefits the community in a synthesis of the universal and the particular. Hegel writes:

Just as nature has its laws, and as animals, trees, and the sun obey their law, so is custom the law appropriate to the spirit of freedom. Custom is what right and morality have not yet reached, namely spirit... Education [Pädagogik] is the art of making human beings ethical: it considers them as natural beings and shows them how they can be reborn and how their original nature can be transformed into a second, spiritual nature so that this spirituality becomes habitual to them.2

Conformity to custom and education into habit set subjects free.

At this point a caveat is necessary. Hegel’s position does not imply unthinking allegiance to automatized habit. The modern organic society, unlike the organic communities of the ancient world, must be organized according to rational principles so that individuals can recognize the rationality of those principles and hence freely choose to conform to them. If this is not the case, and subjects cease using their capacity for reason and cease an active search for self-realization and act according to blind, unthinking habit, then custom or social habit [Sittlichkeit] can become empty habituality [Gewöhnlichkeit] with resultant negative effects for individual and social development:

In habit [Gewöhnlichkeit], the opposition between the natural and the subjective will disappears, and the resistance of the subject is broken [...]. Human beings even die of habit – that is, if they have become totally habituated to life and mentally and physically blunted, and the opposition between subjective consciousness and mental activity has disappeared. For they are active only in so far as they have not yet attained something and wish to assert themselves and show what they can do in pursuit of it. Once this is accomplished, their activity and vitality disappear, and the loss of interest which ensues is mental or physical death.3

Despite his awareness of the danger of the slipping of Sittlichkeit into Gewöhnlichkeit, for Hegel the rationally organized, modern organic community ensures the unity of individual and social interest through active participation in

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2 Hegel, Philosophy of Right, p. 195.
3 Hegel, Philosophy of Right, p. 195.
habitual social and cultural forms. Cultural forms and individual lives are adequate to each other and it is through customary cultural forms that individuals actualize themselves and their own freedom.

The latter part of the nineteenth century sees a qualitative shift away from Hegel's benign view of the relationship between custom and the life of the individual. This reaction stems from an increasing inability of thinkers to recognize in a fast modernizing world the hallmarks of the organic community as described by Hegel. Contra the phrase of the introduction to Elements of the Philosophy of Right, the real no longer seemed to be rational. In his Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft) (1887), Friedrich Tönnies made a clear and influential distinction between traditional, organic communities (Gemeinschaften) where individual and communal interests stand in harmony and modern societies (Gesellschaften) marked by qualities of abstraction, alienation and specialization that obscure the possibility of such harmony. Max Weber, in his work on rationalization and bureaucracy in a disenchanted world, served further to underline the sense of a disjuncture between cultural forms and the life of the individual. Scepticism about the discrepancy between subjective experience and objective cultural forms becomes increasingly typical of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This scepticism finds powerful expression in the work of Georg Simmel, a figure who exercises direct influence on both Bakhtin and Benjamin.

In the winter semester of 1912/13, Benjamin attended Simmel's lectures at the University of Berlin. Simmel's influence was to continue in a quiet but often

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4 Hegel's distinction between Sittlichkeit and Gewöhnlichkeit is comparable to the distinction that I have introduced in the previous chapter between integrated and alienated habit.


7 Of Benjamin's reaction to Simmel Brodersen comments: 'Benjamin had a silent admiration for [Simmel], though not without certain reservations. Benjamin the student was fascinated by Simmel's absolute precision in speech and writings, the diversity of topics in his lectures, his references to marginal cultural and historical phenomena, his inquiring scepticism. His admiration was shared by distinguished figures such as Stefan George, Charles du Bos, Ernst Bloch, Georg
controversial fashion throughout Benjamin's career. His work on Goethe provided Benjamin with a theory of the symbol that became central to the *Trauerspiel* book and, as Buck-Morss notes, survives on into the *Arcades Project*. It was Simmel, rather than Marx, who can be argued to have provided Benjamin with his fundamental understanding of modernity and commodity form. More than Marx, Simmel's analysis of phenomena such as money and fashion informs Benjamin's notion of the symbolic economy of capitalism and the impact of exchange-form on the structures of experience. This attachment to Simmel was to get Benjamin in trouble with his collaborators in the Institute for Social Research, and Adorno in particular. Adorno's criticisms of Benjamin's tendencies to undialectical and unmaterialist thinking in his work on the Paris of Baudelaire, stem, in part, from Adorno's objection to Benjamin's use of Simmel. Finally, Simmel's account of the forms of modern (urban) experience

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Lukács, Gertrud Kantorowics, Margarete Susman, Ludwig Marcuse, and Gershom Scholem. Simmel was, as Albert Salamon once put it, "a genuinely philosophical spirit", beside whom most other university lecturers paled by comparison. So it is doubtless no accident that the other professors whose lectures Benjamin attended during his five semesters in Berlin (the philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Benno Erdmann, the art historian Adolf Goldschmidt, the Germanists Max Hermann and Gustav Roethe) are scarcely mentioned in his writings, except in ironic or polemical allusions. Brodersen, *Benjamin*, p. 46.


See Benjamin's use of Simmel's comments on fashion in *The Arcades Project* in *GS V*, p. 127; *AP*, pp. 76-77.

Adorno criticizes this aspect of 'Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', pointing out that the essay 'not entirely by accident uses a quotation from Simmel'. Adorno, 'Letters to Benjamin', p. 129. The quotation survives Adorno's criticism and reappears in the text of 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' as published by the Institute of Social Research (*GS I* 539-40; *SW IV* 19-20). Benjamin's vigorous response to Adorno provides an interesting suggestion that, despite the distance between Simmel and Marx, Simmel's thought could be rescued for the purposes of leftist cultural politics: 'You look askance at Simmel: might it not be time to respect him as one of the ancestors of cultural bolshevism (Kulturbolshevismus)? (Briefe 808)' Benjamin, nevertheless, seems to have taken on board some of Adorno's criticisms of Simmel. In his encyclopaedia article on 'Jews in German Culture', Benjamin makes the following, in general negative assessment: 'His characteristic dialectic is employed in the service of Lebensphilosophie and attempts a form of psychological impressionism which devotes itself - in a fashion that is hostile to systematic thought - to the analysis of the being [Wesenserkenntnis] of particular mental [geistiger] phenomena and tendencies' (*GS II* 810). Frisby suggests that Adorno's hostility to Simmel's writing may have stemmed from the fact that the essayistic form of Simmel's writing, which Benjamin highlights in the above passage, might have been 'rather too close to that of Adorno's'. David Frisby, *Simmel*, London, 1992, p. 148. The tendency of writers of the left either to criticize Benjamin for his association with Simmel or to minimize this association persists. Esther Leslie's book on Benjamin, written from a hard-left position, all but ignores Simmel's influence, despite the fact that at its heart is a study of Benjamin's treatment of commodity capitalism, an area where, as I have argued, Simmel's influence is unmistakable. Simmel receives only two
as opposed to traditional (rural) experience, particularly as outlined in the essay, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ (1903), informs the structure of Benjamin’s meditation on the same themes.

As more recent critics of Bakhtin have recognized, Simmel was a central figure in Bakhtin’s intellectual make-up too. Previously, Bakhtin scholarship, focusing on Bakhtin’s neo-Kantian roots, has not paid attention to the connection with Simmel. Given that a superficial intellectual history would have neo-Kantianism and Lebensphilosophie, the movement which can be seen to culminate in the work of Simmel, in irreconcilable conflict, the lack of attention paid to Simmel is understandable. It has taken Tihanov’s painstaking work on Bakhtin and Lukács to point out the convergences between these two trends, convergences that Bakhtin draws on.

Unlike Benjamin, Bakhtin does not quote Simmel. Of the Bakhtin Circle members treated here, only Voloshinov makes a direct and, moreover, guarded reference to him. There is no doubt, however, that Bakhtin was familiar with Simmel’s work. Simmel’s essays had appeared in the Russian edition of the journal Logos, a journal which Bakhtin seems to have read. These included references, one of which refers to him, in passing, disparagingly as ‘the money-critic Georg Simmel’. Leslie, Benjamin, p. 9.


14 MPL, p. 39. I analyse Voloshinov’s use of Simmel in the next chapter.

15 Logos was published simultaneously in Russian and German editions in Tübingen and Moscow. Hirschkop notes that it had on its joint editorial board figures such as Husserl, Weber, F. F. Zelinsky, Peter Struve and Heinrich Rickert, and that it published, amongst other things, articles by Simmel and Husserl’s ‘Philosophy as a Strict Science’. The appearance of articles by Simmel
Russian translations of ‘Zur Metaphysik des Todes’ and ‘Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur’, traces of both of which can be seen in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’. Nevertheless, in following the connection between Bakhtin and Simmel, it is necessary to follow Bakhtin’s translations and appropriations, without acknowledgement, of Simmel’s ideas into his own language and idiom.

Simmel contests that modern life is characterized by a preponderance of objective culture over the subjective culture of the individual. As modern culture becomes more complex and developed, to a large degree as a result of specialization, the individual is no longer capable of identifying him or herself with this culture and its ‘law, language, methods of production, art, science and household objects’. These are phenomena that were originally the products of individual men and women like him or herself. According to Simmel, the birth of objective cultural value, thus, has as its corollary the ‘death of the subjective soul’ that invests itself in that process of creation. In the face of the increasingly alien domain of objective culture values, the essence of the individual comes under threat. In the modern metropolis, for example:

such an overwhelming fullness of impersonal Spirit is on offer in buildings, institutions of learning, in the wonders and conveniences of a technology that can defeat space, in the forms of social life and in the visible institutions of the state that the individual [Persönlichkeit] cannot, so to speak, keep his own identity in the face of them.

and Husserl in a journal that was meant to be an organ of neo-Kantianism displays the dialogue and convergence of neo-Kantianism, Lebensphilosophie and phenomenology at the time. See Hirschkop, *Bakhtin*, p. 100.

6 See Bonetskaia, ‘Bakhtin’s Aesthetics as a Logic of Form’, p. 94.

17 None the less, as Léger points out, Simmel sees the tragedy of culture as a result not merely of modernity but also as an epistemological constant as a result of the transformation – exacerbated by the conditions of modernity, nevertheless – that life undergoes when it creates a cultural value. See François Léger, *La Pensée de Georg Simmel*, Paris, 1989, p. 326. This process, however, is an eternal phenomenon. Simmel’s ahistoricism here is the target of Adorno’s criticism.


19 In essence, Simmel transfers to the sphere of culture and history the Kantian dualism of subject and object.

Culture and the life of the individual have suffered a separation that is no less than tragic, following which forms and experience no longer equate to each other.

This is central to both Benjamin and Bakhtin. Their world is no longer a world in which custom is seen unproblematically as a facilitator of individual experience. It is a world where form, whether the habits and cultural forms of tradition or the new habits of rationalizing, industrialized societies and commodity exchange, can increasingly also be viewed as alien and authoritarian. The question posed by Benjamin and Bakhtin, following Simmel, is the extent to which the cultural modes of expression, created by the collective activity of men and women, are adequate to the experience of men and women themselves. The same essential tension that Tihanov identifies as common to Lukács and Bakhtin might be transferred to the comparison of Bakhtin and Benjamin:

the tension between subject and object, author and hero, culture and civilization as variations of the fundamental conflict of modernity – that between the maturing powers of men and women to master nature and the outer world and their growing enslavement at the hands of their own creations.21

Lebensphilosophie, as represented by Simmel, casts life and cultural form in terms of an opposition of ‘life as something heterogeneous, unorderly, and almost anarchic and form as homogeneity and law’. 22 The importance of Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s thought lies in what they do with this opposition. Lebensphilosophie can, in general, be characterized by a tendency to prioritize life over form.23

21 Tihanov, Master and Slave, p. 16.
22 Kai Hammermeister, The German Aesthetic Tradition, Cambridge, 2002, p. 161. Here, we may also consider the figure of Nietzsche. In his authoritative study Schacht argues that Nietzsche is perhaps best understood as one of the inaugurators of Lebensphilosophie. Richard Schacht, Nietzsche, London, 1983, p. 531. Nietzsche’s image of the world as a state of flux in which tendencies to coagulation contend with the dynamism of the will-to-power stands in close proximity to the themes of this chapter. Amongst the many of Nietzsche’s ideas that would also be relevant to this chapter are his criticism of mechanism and causality and his treatment of Kant in The Will to Power (notes from the 1880s, published posthumously), and the distinction between Apollonian art of image and form and Dionysian art of direct experience and intoxication in The Birth of Tragedy (1872). See Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York, 1968, and Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, ed. by Michael Tanner, trans. by Shaun Whiteside, London, 1993.
23 Sandywell comments: ‘One reaction to [the] totalization [of objective culture] is the revolt against form as such and the reversion to an imaginary state of formlessness – leading Simmel to the resigned conclusion that formlessness was itself the appropriate form of modernity.’ This statement is something of a caricature but captures well the opposition of form and culture and formlessness and life. Sandywell, ‘Memories of Nature’, p. 96.
Benjamin and Bakhtin’s position is not as simple although their starting point is similar.

Modes of Experience: Erlebnis and Erfahrung

Simmel’s thinking on the disjuncture between form and life, that was to be so important for Bakhtin and Benjamin, draws on and is part of a debate in nineteenth-century philosophy on the nature of experience which stems from Kant. Kant had argued that experience comes about through the synthetic process that joins the subject’s sense perceptions with a priori concepts in objectively and universally valid judgements. At the heart of Kant’s epistemology is the conviction that subjective intuition alone does not provide the basis for meaningful experience, indeed, for experience of any sort at all.

For experience [Erfahrung] it is not, as is commonly believed, sufficient to compare perceptions and to connect them in one consciousness by means of judging; from that there arises no universal validity and necessity of judgement, on account of which alone it can be objectively valid and so can be experience.

The idea of experience without synthetic judgement (and it can be no more than an idea since Kant’s categories are a priori and universal) is an illusion. Such experience, were it possible, would be no more than a contingent, disordered and incomprehensible multiplicity. Whilst intuition and perception of concrete, empirical particulars are necessary components of experience, they are only able to enter the realm of experience if they are combined synthetically with universal, general and abstract categories.

A completely different judgement therefore occurs before experience can arise from perception. The given intuition must be subsumed

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24 ‘Experience consists in the synthetic connection of appearances (perceptions) in a consciousness, in so far as this connection is necessary.’ Furthermore, necessity is a concept that pertains only to a priori knowledge. Immanuel Kant, ‘Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics’ (1783), in Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics with Selections from the Critique of Pure Understanding, ed. and trans. by Gary Hatfield, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 3-137 (58).

25 Kant, ‘Prolegomena’, pp. 53-54.


27 Any tendencies in Kant to abstraction do not occlude the importance of empirical perception. As Köhnke notes: ‘Kant indicates again and again that every act of the subject in the process of cognition can only be effectual through an actual application to real or in the event thinkable experience.’ Klaus Christian Köhnke, The Rise of Neo-Kantianism: German Academic Philosophy between Idealism and Positivism, Cambridge, 1991, p. 181.
under a concept, which determines the form of judging in general with respect to the intuition, connects the empirical consciousness of the latter in a consciousness in general, and thereby furnishes empirical judgments with universal validity.  

Thus, Kant’s theoretical framework prioritizes all that is regular, necessary, homogeneous, universal and objective over all that is irregular, contingent, manifold, particular and subjective, defining experience (Erfahrung) as only that in which the latter categories are subsumed by the former. Kant establishes, then, an opposition between the ‘manifold of empirical intuition’ of particular experiences (Erlebnisse) and the homogeneity and universality of a priori categories through whose offices alone true experience or Erfahrung can come into being.

In the course of the nineteenth century, this opposition of Erfahrung and Erlebnis and the evaluative accent that Kant had put on the former was revisited by a range of thinkers. At the beginning of the century, the main approach of philosophers was an attempt to overcome the range of Kantian dualisms, such as the dualisms between subject and object, Erfahrung and Erlebnis, by means of the construction of systems of various forms of holistic idealism, culminating in the ‘absolute idealism’ of Hegel. Towards the end of the century, however, a group of thinkers who can be associated with Lebensphilosophie and phenomenology took a different approach, accepting, in essence, Kantian dualisms, but subjecting them to different characterizations and evaluations. Thus, Wilhelm Dilthey

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28 Kant, ‘Prolegomena’, p. 58.
31 Rousseau’s influence was also important. Rousseau had argued that the transition from the happy state of nature to a state of inequality and servitude is made possible only by the development of calculation and abstraction, particularly through the invention of language. A theory of experience constructed on the basis of Rousseau’s thinking here bears strong similarities to the position of Lebensphilosophie. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, A Discourse on the Origin of
contrasts the intensity of *Erlebnis* (inner lived experience), to the shallowness of mere *aussere Erfahrung* (outer sensory experience).  

Similarly, Husserl objected to the scientific and abstract aspects of Kantian notions of *Erfahrung* prioritizing, instead, an investigation of the structures of pre-reflexive, inner experience. As Jay notes, in these cases *Erlebnis* was an honorific term for subjective, concrete intuitive responses to the world that were prior to the constructed abstractions of science or the intellect. In this tradition, then, both the evaluation and the content of the concepts, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, have been substantially modified, whilst retaining their connection back to Kant. Returning to Simmel: it is in this context that it is possible to understand the tragedy of culture. Simmel’s split between objective and subjective culture, culture and life, represents a split between two modes of experience, that of *Erfahrung* and that of *Erlebnis*. These two modes of experience become important principles in Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s thought: in Bakhtin implicitly, in Benjamin much more explicitly.

Beyond the German tradition, Henri Bergson, also a thinker of the loose movement of *Lebensphilosophie* and a thinker who exerted influence on Bakhtin and Benjamin, makes a similar distinction between different modes of

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**33** See Edmund Husserl, ‘Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man’ (1935), in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. by Quentin Lauer, New York, 1965, pp. 149-92. Husserl’s objections to Kant are similar to those raised by Bakhtin that I discuss below. ‘According to Kant, transcendental subjectivity is a transpersonal abstractly deduced principle of justification, whereas for Husserl it is a concrete and finite subject.’ Dan Zahavi, *Husserl’s Phenomenology*, Stanford CA, 2003, p. 108.

**34** Jay, ‘Experience without a Subject’, p. 195.

**35** In this context one should not ignore Bakhtin’s place within the Russian philosophical tradition (and particularly in relation to trends emerging from Slavophilism), with its tendency to oppose a (Western, rationalist) concern with ‘abstract’ truth to a (Russian, irrationalist) concern with ‘lived’ truth. Emerson notes possible affinities between Bakhtin and the thought of Soloviev and Ivanov and their ‘blurring and rubbing out of fundamental categories of rationality’ in Emerson, *The First Hundred Years*, p. 258. Similarly, Emerson and Morson locate Bakhtin in a tradition of Russian ‘anti-ideological’ thinkers such as Herzen, Tolstoy and Chekhov who see the answers to life’s questions in life itself rather than in abstract thought. See Emerson and Morson, *Bakhtin*, pp. 23-24.

**36** Bergson is a reference point for Bakhtin in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Benjamin engages intensively with Bergson in his reading of Proust and Baudelaire.
experience that can be seen to correspond to Erlebnis and Erfahrung. Bergson posits two separate categories: temps, time as it is measured by science, divisible and repeatable, subject to analytical categories of space and language; and durée, time, continuous and changing, as it is experienced by the subject in the flux of inner life, prior to such analytical categories. For Bergson, reality is a matter of durée. In this reality, immediately experienced, exist not ‘completed things [ choses faites ] but only things that are in the process of being completed, not states that endure but only states that change’. Nevertheless, subjects need stable fulcra ( points d'appui ) in this flux of becoming and representations of states and things for thoroughly practical purposes. Hence they abstract from the flux of becoming fixed sensations and ideas, by substituting the discontinuous for the continuous, stability for mobility, and temps for durée.

In consequence, Bergson posits two radically different modes of thought and experience, intuition and intelligence, that refer respectively to the direct experience of durée and the abstracted cognition of temps. Intuition, on the one hand, captures the fluidity of becoming, ‘an uninterrupted continuity of unpredictable novelty’.

Intelligence provides access only to reconstructed abstractions of repeatable stability that effaces novelty in presenting the new as ‘a new arrangement of pre-existing elements’. For Bergson, true experience is accessible only to intuition and its true nature is subject to misrepresentation by the application of analytical intelligence.

Experience is, shall we say, the indivisible and indestructible continuity of a melody where the past enters the present and forms with it an undivided whole that remains undivided and indivisible despite what is added to it at every moment, or rather, because of what is added to it. We are able to gain an intuition of it, but, as soon as we seek an intellectual representation of it, we immediately put together, one after another, a series of states that have become distinct from each other like the pearls which make up a necklace, and that thus need a thread to hold them together, a thread that is neither one thing or the other, that in no way resembles the pearls, that in no way resembles anything at all, but, rather, is an empty

38 Henri Bergson, 'De la position des problemes', in La Pensee et le mouvant, pp. 25-98 (31).
entity, a mere word. Intuition gives us something of which intelligence grasps only a spatial transposition and a metaphorical translation.\(^{40}\)

The abstracted object of intelligence – the pearls of the necklace and most importantly the imputed string that holds the pearls together\(^{41}\) – is no more than a transposition: a translation of experience into a set of terms that are alien to the nature of experience itself. The objects of intelligence, the only objects that thought can subject to analysis, are, as a result of this process, no more than illusions, and Kant’s giving precedence to *Erfahrung*, no more than falling prey to illusion.\(^{42}\)

The application of intelligence results in failure: ‘Intelligence inhabits completed concepts and attempts to seize thereby, as if with a net, something of the reality that passes by [...] But, as a result, it allows to escape from reality that which in which its essence consists.’\(^{43}\) But its failure is made more serious by the fact that it results in a beautiful illusion, a transfiguration and falsification of the nature of experience that allows the true nature of life to slip by. This idea, that abstracting forms of representations of experience as *Erfahrung* not only fail to capture the fragmented immediacy of *Erlebnis* but may also transfigure and falsely represent it, is central to Bakhtin and Benjamin.\(^{44}\) The desire to abstract closed units from the flux of experience is, perhaps, necessary for practical purposes as Bergson has it. Bakhtin and Benjamin, however, are always aware of the dangers of transfiguration and falsification inherent in representations of this form: in the aura of the traditional art-work or the seductive lure of the commodity for Benjamin, or in the finality of the monologic utterance for Bakhtin. In this sense, *Erfahrung* may be associated with habitualized form; it is experience that has been ordered, made repeatable, a form created out of the flux of a disordered

\(^{40}\) Bergson, ‘De la position des problèmes’, p. 76.
\(^{41}\) The string that holds the pearls together alludes to Kant’s investigation of the transcendental categories.
\(^{42}\) Bergson, ‘De la position des problèmes’, p. 69.
\(^{43}\) Bergson, ‘Introduction à la métaphysique’, p. 212.
\(^{44}\) ‘Transfiguration’ (*Verklärung*) is a Benjaminian term, a Bakhtinian analogy of which is ‘transcription’ as he uses it in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (for example, *TPA* 39), or in M. M. Bakhtin, ‘The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art’, in *Art and Answerability*, pp. 257-325 (285). I discuss Benjamin’s use of the term ‘transfiguration’ in my final chapter.
world of immediate experience (*Erlebnis*). But as we have already seen in the previous chapter, habitualized forms of experience contain their own dangers. For Bakhtin and Benjamin, an awareness of these dangers only complicates their task as they seek to negotiate the question of how cultural forms might be adequate to experience.

For all Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s common ground with certain aspects of *Lebensphilosophie* and their use of parts of its conceptual basis, both thinkers see problems inherent in the split that it establishes between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. The championing of *Erlebnis*, particularly in those quarters of *Lebensphilosophie* associated with irrationalism, could have a dark side. Bakhtin and Benjamin who were nineteen and twenty-two respectively at the outbreak of the First World War must have been aware of this. Italian Futurism with the notorious ninth slogan of its manifesto - ‘We will glorify war – the world’s only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman’ – had drawn explicitly on Bergson. They found in his thought inspiration for their own championing of raw and irrational experience over exhausted civilized rationality. In the German context, Ernst Jünger had described a similar position in his tellingly entitled, long essay on the First World War, *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (‘Combat as inner experience’, 1926):

There is still much of the animal in man who slumbers on the comfortable, woven carpets of a polished, honed, and silently intricate civilization, wrapped up in habit and pleasant formality; and yet when the pointer on the dial of life swings back to the red line of the primitive, the mask falls; naked as ever, he breaks out, primal man, the cave-dweller, in the full unruliness of his unchained instincts. Whenever life reverts to its primal functions, his blood, which up until then has flowed coolly and regularly though his veins in the mechanistic activity of his stony, urban skeleton, foams up, and the

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ancient rock which has lain for long ages, cold and rigid, in hidden depths, melts once again into white-hot lava. 47

Here, Jünger opposes the polished, silent mask of the civilization that one can associate with Erfahrung, ‘covered up in habit and pleasant forms’, with the bestial blood lust of the primal sphere of Erlebnis.

For Benjamin, as I shall show, a mythical hypostatization of Erlebnis such as Jünger’s is one of the pillars of fascism. Bakhtin, too, as I argue below, seems to discern the bleak and possibly violent consequences of a one-sided celebration of sheer Erlebnis. An underlying argument in favour of a more dialectical understanding of the relationship between Erfahrung and Erlebnis is common to both thinkers. Both are concerned with combating abstracting and authoritarian forms of Erfahrung without falling prey to the dangers of a hypostatization of Erlebnis and without surrendering the principle of benign form.

Bakhtin and Benjamin: Culture and Experience

1. Bakhtin’s Tragedy of Culture

Bakhtin wrote his extensive fragment, Toward a Philosophy of the Act, in difficult material circumstances in Nevel and Vitebsk between 1920 and 1924. This text echoes the concerns of many of the thinkers discussed above in connection with Lebensphilosophie. It describes a situation in which human existence is scarred by a rupture between the experience of life and the systems whereby subjects register and give form to that experience:

The moment which discursive theoretical thinking (in the natural sciences and philosophy), historical description-exposition, and aesthetic intuition have in common […] is this: all these activities establish a fundamental split between the content or sense of a given act/activity and the historical actuality of its being, the actual and once-occurrent experiencing of it […]. And as a result, two worlds confront each other, two worlds that have absolutely no communication with each other and are mutually impervious: the world of culture and the world of life, the only world in which we create, cognize, contemplate, live our lives and die or – the world in which the acts of our activity are objectified and the world in which

47 Ernst Jünger, Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis, Berlin, 1926, p. 41.
these acts actually proceed and are actually accomplished once and only once. (TPA 1-2)

The strains of a lament over the tragedy of culture can be heard as Bakhtin establishes a by now-familiar opposition: life as it is experienced, or *Erlebnis*, on the one hand, an open, transient and concrete process of becoming; and life as it is systematized in cultural and intellectual forms, or *Erfahrung*, repeatable, abstracted and objectified. Bakhtin, like Simmel, highlights the paradoxical nature of cultural forms that both make life meaningful but also, in the very movement of transferring meaning, remove themselves from life itself. Like Simmel, Bakhtin captures the sense of self-alienation that men and women experience in becoming meaningful selves.

Bakhtin’s portrayal of the tragedy of culture, however, differs from the standard view of *Lebensphilosophie* in some important aspects. Simmel contends that the tragedy of culture results in our alienation from ourselves in culture in so far as we are not able to recognize ourselves as the authors of objective cultural values. Thus, Simmel gives precedence to life as the sphere of the subject’s authentic being as opposed to culture which is described in terms of alienation. Bakhtin’s description is, however, of a more complex situation:

Contemporary man feels sure of himself, feels well-off and clear-headed, where he is himself essentially and fundamentally not present in the autonomous world of a domain of culture and its immanent law of creation. But he feels unsure of himself, feels destitute and deficient in understanding, where he has to do with himself, where he is the center from which answerable acts or deeds issue, in actual and once-occurrent life. That is, we act confidently only when we do so not as ourselves, but as those possessed by the immanent necessity of the meaning of some domain of culture. (TPA 20)

Here, Bakhtin also prioritizes the sphere of life, the place where contemporary man ‘has to do with himself’ that is ‘actual and once-occurrent life’. But, for Bakhtin, the subject does not feel at home in this sphere of authenticity that, paradoxically, becomes a site of the experience of alienation. On the contrary, where the subject feels at home is where s/he is not present – that is, in the sphere of culture. This results in a more problematic sense of tragedy than Simmel’s. Simmel’s tragedy lies in the fact that the subject as authentic being is alienated
from the objective cultural products of his spirit. Bakhtin locates the tragic divide within the subject itself, insofar as her or his sense of being-at-home takes place beyond her- or himself.

Bakhtin’s thought in Toward a Philosophy of the Act is much more, then, than a regurgitation of the basic tenets of Lebensphilosophie, and its underlying structure deserves close attention. Bakhtin establishes a distinction between two modes of activity and being: a distinction between the ‘given’ (dannyi) and ‘posited’ (zadannyi) modes of reality. The ‘given’ mode, is complete (zavershennyi) and self-sufficient (samovol'nyi), characterized by causality, autonomy, and closure. The posited mode is open, in a state of development, and seeks relations and self-confirmation beyond itself. There are three levels on which this opposition operates. The first two are familiar from theories of the tragedy of culture: the split between the given world of general culture and the posited world of life; and the lower level split between the given product of a subject’s activity and the posited activity itself – what Simmel terms the objectification of spirit and the subjective spirit that goes into the making of it. The third level represents something new that Bakhtin brings to this debate. This is the level of intersubjectivity. According to Bakhtin, a subject’s mode of being can be classified according to categories of passivity and activity, depending on the relations with other subjects. These categories, too, can be understood in terms of the opposition of ‘given’ and ‘posited’. In Coates’s interpretation: ‘I perceive myself as incomplete and developing, but other people perceive me as completed and whole. Likewise, in my nature as agent I am active and posited, whereas in my capacity as object I am passive and given.’ 49 In addition, one can subsume Bakhtin’s distinction of the two modes of truth to this same basic opposition between given and posited. Bakhtin distinguishes between truth (istina) that tends towards universality and is constant and repeatable and the truth of an event (pravda).

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48 Dannyi and zadannyi are the Russian equivalents of gegeben (given) and aufgegeben (set as a task), standard terms in the German tradition which go back to Kant.
49 Coates, Christianity in Bakhtin, p. 27.
Bakhtin does not view these sets of oppositions in neutral terms. He presents the image of a world in which the openness and dynamism of the posited is threatened by the finality and ossification of the given, in which the particular is excluded by the universal, in which difference and heterogeneity is in danger of being swallowed up by equivalence and homogeneity.\(^\text{50}\) *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* is a trenchant critique of what Bakhtin terms the ‘fatal theoreticism’ (TPA 27) that we may associate with (neo-)Kantianism.\(^\text{51}\) Theoreticism, in its concentration on the universal and abstract rather than the particular, produces a world which excludes life as a unique and open process of becoming in which particular subjects participate. It produces a world in which:

we would find ourselves to be determined, predetermined, bygone, and finished, that is essentially not living. We would have cast ourselves out of life – as answerable, risk-fraught, and open becoming through performed actions – and into an indifferent and, fundamentally, accomplished and finished theoretical Being. (TPA 9)

In theoreticism, which, with Kant, values only what is universal in a particular act, the existence of a particular subject becomes a matter of indifference.\(^\text{52}\) Kant’s focus is on ‘possible experience’, not the actual experience of concrete subjects.\(^\text{53}\) As Bakhtin comments: ‘The theoretical world is obtained though an essential and fundamental abstraction of the fact of my unique being and from the moral sense of that fact – “as if I did not exist”’ (TPA 9). What results is a self-enclosed and repeatable sphere of culture which is characterized by concepts of norm and law that have been emptied of practical meaning.

\(^{50}\) Coates comments: ‘The world of givenness, if it is allowed to, will dominate and sterilize the open event of being. Bakhtin is convinced that the given aspects of reality, however they are conceived, may always potentially erode or devour the posited aspects, which for him constitute the life-force of being.’ Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin*, p. 30.

\(^{51}\) Holquist is correct in observing that *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* is concerned more with Kant than with neo-Kantianism. Michael Holquist, ‘Foreword’, in *TPA*, pp. vii-xv (ix).

\(^{52}\) This is the essence of Kant’s categorical imperative which focuses only on what tends to universal validity in a particular act. As Kant formulates it: ‘I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.’ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 15. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* contains a sustained critique of Kantian ethics. Bakhtin argues as follows: ‘The categorical imperative determines the performed act as a universally valid law, but as a law that is devoid of a particular, positive content.’ As a consequence, this ‘law of conformity-to-the-law’ becomes an ‘an empty formula of pure theoreticism’ that ‘excludes the actual – individual and historical – self-activity of the performed act (TPA 25-26)’.

\(^{53}\) For Kant’s discussion of the possibility of experience, see Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 151-53.
Nevertheless, Bakhtin does not hypostatize the posited mode of reality. He makes it clear that a resort to *lebensphilosophische* stalwarts such as intuition or immediate experience that prioritize the posited is no solution. Contemporary philosophy is in a "state of crisis":

The performed act or deed is split into an objective content/sense and a subjective process of performance. Out of the first fragment one creates a single systemic unity of culture that is really splendid in its stringent clarity. Out of the second fragment, if it is not discarded as completely useless (it is purely and entirely subjective once the content/sense has been subtracted) one can at best extract and accept a certain aesthetic and theoretical something, like Bergson's *durée* or *élan vital* [12 illegible words]. But neither in the first world nor in the second is there room for the actual and answerable performance of a deed. *(TPA 21)*

For Bakhtin, Bergson's aestheticization of immediate experience effected by *Lebensphilosophie* does no more than reproduce the split between content and deed in a covert form. Similarly, in Bakhtin's reading of Nietzsche, a Dionysian surrender to the intoxication of immediate experience is also not an option, since from this gesture of surrender to being 'possessed by Being', it follows that 'the passive moment in participation is moved to the fore, while my to-be-accomplished self-activity is reduced' *(TPA 49)*. Thus, Bakhtin's understanding of Nietzsche is that his emphasis on the posited aspect of life in fact results in a production of givenness.* Against these proposals, Bakhtin makes it clear that theoretical modes that deal with the given cannot simply be jettisoned:

> Theoretical cognition of an object that exists by itself, independent of its actual position in the once-occurrent world from the standpoint of a participant's unique place, is perfectly justified. But it does not constitute ultimate cognition; it constitutes only an auxiliary, technical moment of such ultimate cognition. *(TPA 48)*

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54 Roberts seems wide of the mark when he argues that Bakhtin was following the lead of Dilthey and his conception of subjective *verstehen* (understanding), which he opposes to the objective knowledge of the sciences. *Verstehen*, like Bergson's intuition, prioritizes immediate experience. See Roberts, 'Poetics Hermeneutics Dialogics', p. 119.

55 Bakhtin's reading presents a somewhat caricatured and reductionist notion that does not do justice to Nietzsche's understanding of the interdependence of Apollonian and Dionysian modes. Bakhtin is more on target in his assessment of then modish Dionysianism: 'The aspiration of Nietzsche's philosophy reduces to a considerable extent to this possessedness by Being (one-sided participation); its ultimate result is the absurdity of contemporary Dionysianism' *(TPA 49)*.
Insufficient in itself, theoretical cognition is, nevertheless, an indispensable part of experience. What is needed, instead is a plane of higher unity that joins these fragmented aspects of activity.

Bakhtin’s method is simpler than it at first seems. He confronts two trends of thought. As we have seen, the first trend is the theoreticism that favours theory over practice, the universal over the particular, the abstract over the specific, the objective over the subjective and certainly the primacy of the former categories in comprehending the latter. The second, Lebensphilosophie and what Bakhtin describes, perhaps simplistically, as the irrationalism of Nietzsche and the pessimism of Spengler, is a reaction against the excesses of rationalism and abstraction of the first trend that simply reverses its evaluations. Whilst the brunt of Bakhtin’s attack is directed against the first trend, Bakhtin is not content simply to reverse the evaluation and champion life over culture in an unreflexive fashion. Rather, Toward a Philosophy of the Act aims at a synthesis of the two trends. It is only a synthesis of these oppositions that will take philosophy beyond what Bakhtin sees as false dichotomies, and hence produce a new way to act. This will be a synthesis that is not transcendental, but rooted in the process of experiencing.

2. Beyond Tragedy: Responsible Participation

The synthesis that Bakhtin proposes is to be found in responsible participation. By responsible participation Bakhtin means that form of activity in which subjects recognize their participation in life in a particular and concrete temporal and spatial context. Here subjects exist in relation to other subjects towards whom they necessarily adopt emotional and evaluative attitudes.

What does it mean to assert that historical mankind recognizes in its history or in its culture certain things as values? It is an assertion of an empty possibility of content, no more. Of what concern is it to me that there is an $a$ in Being for whom a $b$ is valuable? Insofar as I affirm my own unique place in the unitary Being of historical mankind, insofar as I am its own non-alibi, i.e., stand in an active emotional-volitional relationship to it, I assume an emotional-volitional position in the values it recognizes. (TPA 47)
Bakhtin’s point here is that Being is not a neutral state but an evaluative event of a subject’s self-activity. Participation here means the action of assuming an evaluative stand towards other subjects. This is what Bakhtin means by the ‘non-alibi in Being’. We cannot pretend that we are not there and do not have a view. Bakhtin asks us to take a stand, in the double sense of that phrase: both to accept our position in a real and concrete world, and also to accept that we thereby take an evaluative position towards our environment. When we take a stand the world that seems to be made of abstract, universal, equivalent and repeatable identities becomes one that is filled with concrete, individual, variegated and unique elements that are distinguished by subtle shades of evaluation. The abstract and empty categories of space and time thicken and become heavy, and, in Bakhtin’s evocative description, ‘blaze up with the light of value’ (TPA 59).

If we act in this fashion and take a stand, then we also take responsibility for our being. The implications of this can be seen by analysing a metaphor that Bakhtin uses to describe this situation:

Being that is detached from the unique emotional-volitional center of answerability is a rough draft, an unacknowledged possible variant of once-occurrent Being; only through the answerable participation effected by a unique act or deed can one get out of the realm of endless draft versions and rewrite one’s life once and for all in the form of a fair copy. (TPA 44)

Theoretically a draft could be replaced by a different version of which there might be many. A draft offers its writer an alibi: ‘Don’t take that statement seriously; that isn’t what I mean; I’ll say it differently in the next draft.’ A fair copy, however, is not hypothetical. It is unique and occurs only once. When we offer a document as a fair copy we have to stand by what we have written; we have to

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56 Bakhtin is close here to the thought of Aristotle and his understanding of man as the zoon politikon whose essence is to be found in activity and participation in a plural, public sphere. Furthermore, Bakhtin’s thought would bear comparison with Hannah Arendt who draws substantially on Aristotle. Many of her key themes – her preference for activity over contemplation, for becoming over being, her emphasis on participation in the public sphere and on the nexus between freedom and speech – resonate with Bakhtin’s ideas. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, London, 1998. Attention to Arendt might usefully supplement Hirschkop’s analysis of Bakhtin as a thinker of the public sphere in Hirschkop, *Bakhtin*.

57 This phrase makes one think of Benjamin’s concept of illumination, a connection that I discuss below.
make ourselves publicly responsible for it in a more binding sense than when we present a draft.

If we accept the responsible nature of our situatedness in life, our non-alibi in once-occurrent being, if we produce our life in a fair copy, we take responsibility for it and cannot pretend that it is something provisional and hypothetical, as happens in the 'possible experience' of Kant. This intersubjective act of responsibility (it is an intersubjective act, since it assumes the presentation of our life to others in the same way as we present a document) subsumes the hypothetical and theoretical to the particular and concrete, thereby reconfiguring the spheres of culture and life in the unity of our human activity. Only the responsible act, thus conceived, can reunite the two faces of the totality of experience, 'the objective unity of culture' (characterized by Erfahrung) and 'the never-repeatable uniqueness of actually lived and experienced life' (Erlebnis):

It is only the once-occurrent event of Being in the process of actualization that can constitute this unique unity; all that is theoretical or aesthetic must be determined as a constituent moment in the once-occurrent event of Being, although no longer, of course, in theoretical terms. An act must acquire a single unitary plane to be able to reflect itself in both directions – in its sense or meaning and in its being: it must acquire the unity of two-sided answerability. (TPA 2)

_Toward a Philosophy of the Act_ sets out a thesis according to which the split spheres of culture and life, given and posited, Erfahrung and Erlebnis might be reunited in responsible human activity. Bakhtin’s text, however, fails to raise the important question of the ontological status of the responsible act as he describes it. That is to say: it is not clear whether the responsible act belongs to the category of what is or the category of what ought to be, whether it is a descriptive or a deontological category.\(^\text{58}\)

\(^{58}\) Here Hirschkop’s comments on the similar lack of clarity over the status of the notion of dialogue are relevant: '[Dialogism] is both the natural state of being of language as such and a valorized category of certain discourses. It has a role in the theoretical critique of Saussurean linguistics and in the evaluative literary history Bakhtin narrates. When these two senses of the term are conflated, the specific form dialogism takes in the novel is assumed to be the manifestation of the true essence of language, an essence somehow repressed in the monological. In fact it is the status of monologism which is most problematic: if dialogism is the nature of all language, then what gives rise to monologism? For monologism is not merely an illusion or an error, it is a form of discourse with real, if mystifying, effects, which must be accounted for in a theory of language. It is this reality, or effectivity, of an illusionary or mystifying language which
The answer would seem to be that it is both. Responsible participation is an element of our activity. Nevertheless, it is an element that is constantly threatened by erosion in the face of tendencies inherent in modernity. On the one hand, one can concur with Hirschkop, one of the few critics to attempt a serious historicization of Bakhtin's thought, who argues convincingly that the Bakhtin of *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* can be read as a critic of modernity. Despite some infelicities, his general picture rings true:

It required no special power of analysis to see that, in the wake of the First World War, Europe's traditional sources of obligation and its corresponding subjective attribute, 'responsibility', were drying up [...]. In Bakhtin's account, 'oughtness' and 'responsibility' constitute an original dimension of all culture which disappears from view when modern science and juridical thought force it into their two-dimensional frame.

On the other hand, one can also concur with Tihanov that Bakhtin's early work represents 'phenomenological ahistoricism which seeks to grasp the eternal elements of the human condition'. In order to grasp the full force of Bakhtin's text, it is necessary to see that it is Janus-faced, looking both at the eternal nature of the human condition and at Bakhtin's own modernity.

The face that stares disconsolately at the fragmented modern world is viewed in its most powerful form on the last pages of the first of the two sections of Bakhtin's essay. Here, Bakhtin begins a lament that echoes the nostalgia of the cultural conservatives of his day for a world unafflicted by the fragmentation of modernity:

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is evaded when the monological is treated as a theoretical error.' Hirschkop, 'A Response to the Forum on Mikhail Bakhtin', p. 75. Hirschkop develops this and related ideas in such a way as to highlight the political dimension of Bakhtin's thought as one of the central themes of his later monograph. See Hirschkop, *Bakhtin*, for example, pp. 55-57. Hirschkop's 'Is Dialogism for Real?' also explores the double nature of dialogue as description and political imperative. Ken Hirschkop, 'Is Dialogism for Real?', in Shepherd (ed.), *The Contexts of Bakhtin*, pp. 183-95.

59 Tihanov also effects a certain historicization of Bakhtin by virtue of the comparative angle gained from his study of Lukács. General historicization is not, however, his major aim. Hirschkop's work, by contrast, in its desire to present the 'actuality of Mikhail Bakhtin' considers historicization to be one of its major tasks. See Tihanov, *Master and Slave*, and Hirschkop, *Bakhtin*.

60 For example, 'modern science' is his consistent and infelicitous gloss on Kantian theoreticism.


The contemporary crisis is, fundamentally, a crisis of contemporary action. An abyss has formed between the motive of the actually performed act or deed and its product. But in consequence of this, the product of the deed, severed from its ontological roots, has withered as well. (TPA 54)

This lament ascribes a role to economic development in the process in which the forces of responsible activity are eroded, arguing that the money-economy may have become the structuring principle of modern morality:

In relation to the present moment, economic materialism is in the right, although not because the motives of the actually performed act have penetrated inside the product but rather the reverse: the product in its validity walls itself off from the actually performed act in its actual motivation. (TPA 54-55)

One may put this passage in the context of Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism. Bakhtin’s notion that the product comes to enjoy an existence independent of its producers bears similarities to Marx’s views. Another likely source, however, for this insight is Simmel’s Philosophy of Money (1900). Like Lukács, Simmel highlights the way in which the development of the money-economy exacerbates tendencies to calculation and abstraction in human activity; he also argues that it fosters indifference and characterlessness:

This relationship between the significance for life of the intellect and the significance of money leads one, first of all, to a negative characterization of those epochs and areas of activity in which these two things dominate: they have a certain characterlessness. If character always means that people and things are differentiated from other people and things on the basis of their individual form of existence, the intellect is ignorant of this. For the intellect is the indifferent mirror of reality in which all elements are seen as equivalent [...]. This phenomenon can also be seen in the characterlessness of money. Just as money is the mechanical reflex of the values of things according to which all parties are treated the same, so in money-society all people have the same value — not because every person has worth, but rather because no person has worth since the only thing that has worth is money.65

63 Simmel’s philosophy of money shares substantial ground both with Marx’s theory of alienation and with Lukács’s theory of reification. For a detailed analysis of this, see Gianfranco Poggi, Money and the Modern Mind: Georg Simmel’s Philosophy of Money, Berkeley CA, 1993.
64 The indifference that he attributes to money is linked to the blase character of the modern city-dweller that he describes in ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’. Simmel, ‘Die Gross-Städte’, pp. 192-204.
Whether or not Bakhtin draws on Simmel, the terms of Simmel’s critique of money-society fit Bakhtin’s view of a modernity from which participative thinking has been exiled. Characterlessness, which can be glossed as a failure to assume one’s own responsible individuality, intellectuality, which one might understand as the hallmark of theoreticism, indifference and the tendency to treat other subjects as equivalent; all these are hallmarks of the world in which responsible activity is alien.

Bakhtin takes the notion of the tragedy of culture to its logical and pessimistic conclusion. On the one hand, Bakhtin accepts the lebenphilosophische idea that theory and culture have become detached from life and form an autonomous, hermetic realm to which subjects have no authentic access. Earlier in the text, Bakhtin sees in the immanent development of technology the ultimate and terrifyingly destructive expression of this detachment:

Thus [technological] instruments are perfected according to their own inner law, and, as a result, they develop from what was initially a means of rational defence into a terrifying, deadly, and destructive force. All that which is technological, when divorced from the once-occurrent unity of life and surrendered to the will of the law immanent to its won development, is frightening; it may from time to time irrupt into this once-occurrent unity as an irresponsibly destructive and terrifying force. (TPA 7)

On the other hand, Bakhtin demonstrates none of the lebenphilosophische belief in the redeeming potential of pure lived experience. The ultimate consequence of the tragedy of culture is that, as culture, by losing touch with life, becomes ossified and loses its human aspect, so lived experience begins to deteriorate, reverting to pure biological, non-human nature. The later passage continues with an image of a thorough-going and brutal degradation of experience:

All the energy of answerable performing is drawn off into the autonomous domain of culture, and, as a result, the performed act, detached from that energy, sinks to the level of elementary biological

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66 Bakhtin’s insight into the connection between (Kantian) theoreticism and the exchange-economy is echoed by Eagleton: ‘The qualities of the Kantian moral law are those of the commodity form. Abstract, universal and rigorously self-identical, the law of Reason is a mechanism which, like the commodity, effects formally equal exchanges between isolated individual subjects, erasing the difference of their needs and desires in its homogenizing injunctions.’ Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic, p. 83.
and economic motivation, that is, loses all its ideal moments: that is precisely what constitutes the state of civilization. The whole wealth of culture is placed in the service of the biological act. (TPA 55)

This result of this is a world of death and a world that is all but dead; a world reduced to the biological and material minimum; a natural world without subjects; the ravaged landscape of trench warfare. 67

With his use of the term 'civilization', Bakhtin appears to refer directly to Oswald Spengler, and the distinction that Spengler makes between culture and civilization in The Decline of the West. 68 Begun in 1911, but first published in 1918 to enormous acclaim, Spengler’s monumental account of the decline of the West was widely seen as having received prophetic vindication in the destruction of European culture on the battlefields of the First World War. 69

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67 Brandist suggests, correctly it seems, that ‘this Bakhtin presumably saw manifested in the wars and revolutions that had gripped Russia and much of Europe in the years before the composition of his essay’. Brandist, The Bakhtin Circle, pp. 36-7.

68 Elias gives an account of the development of the antithesis of culture and civilization in Norbert Elias, The Civilizing Process, Oxford, 1994, especially, ‘Part One: On the Sociogenesis of the Concepts of “Civilization” and “Culture”’, pp. 5-42. One source of this distinction is Kant: ‘We are cultivated to a high degree by art and science. We are civilised to the point of excess in all kinds of social courtesies and proprieties. But we are still a long way from the point where we could consider ourselves morally mature. For while the idea of morality is indeed present in culture, an application of this idea which only extends to the semblances of morality, as in love of honour and outward propriety, amounts merely to civilisation.’ Immanuel Kant, ‘Ideas on a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’ [1784], in Kant, Political Writings, ed. by Hans Reiss, trans. by H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 41-53 (49). Another source is Rousseau. Both Rousseau and Kant, in their negative description of civilization, emphasize the way in which it induces men and women to act insincerely. Rousseau’s comments on this matter raise a number of themes of relevance here: custom, ritual, system, and insincerity: ‘Before art had moulded our behaviour, and taught our passions to speak an artificial language, our morals were rude but natural [...]. In our day, now that more subtle study and a more refined taste have reduced the art of pleasing to a system, there prevails in modern manners a servile and deceptive conformity; so that one would think every mind had been cast in the same mould. Politeness [...] decorum [...] ceremony [...] fashion [...] these we must always follow, never the promptings of our own nature.’ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences’ (1750), in The Social Contract and Discourses, pp. 1-29 (6). Similarly, Bakhtin stresses the link between ritual and insincerity as a mark of deadened, theoretical being with his notion of the impostor: ‘In attempting to understand [...] every act we perform – as a ritual act, we turn into impostors or pretenders (TPA 52).’

69 See Spengler’s comments on the writing of his book and its connection with the war in Oswald Spengler, Der Untergang des Abendlandes, 2 vols, Munich, 1923, vol. 1, pp. 62-67. On the reception of Spengler in Germany Hawthorn comments: ‘[German] wartime propaganda had portrayed the battle as an heroic struggle between culture and civilization, between the high ideals of Germany and the crass materialism of England. The defeat appeared to mean that culture and with it the whole humanist Weltanschauung had apparently gone down [...] to civilization. The despair which this induced accounted immediately after 1918 for the extraordinary popularity of Spengler’s The Decline of the West in which the distinction between culture and civilization was most dramatically drawn and in which the transition from the one to the other, from the summer to
What is civilization, understood as the organico-logical sequel, fulfilment and finale of a culture? For every Culture has its own Civilization. In this work, for the first time the two words, hitherto used to express an indefinite, more or less ethical, distinction, are used in a periodic sense, to express a strict and necessary organic succession. The Civilization is the inevitable destiny of the Culture, and in this principle we obtain the viewpoint from which the deepest and gravest problems of historical morphology become capable of solution. Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are a conclusion, the thing-become (das Gewordene) succeeding the thing-becoming (dem Werden), death following life, rigidity following expansion, intellectual old-age and the stone-built, petrifying world-city following mother-earth and the spiritual childhood of Doric and Gothic. They are an end, irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again.70

In the face of this prospect, Bakhtin does not directly contradict Spengler’s view of the decline of Western culture. Spengler had conceived of history in terms of cycles of decline and fall. Hence, despite his overwhelming pessimism about the West, he thought that the Faustian culture which constituted our Western modernity would, passing through the moribund stage of civilization, eventually give way to a new and vital cultural epoch.71 Bakhtin’s criticism is reserved for this: Spengler’s faint glimmer of optimism in the possibility of historical renewal. History, Bakhtin argues, as a force conceived of as outside lived-experience, cannot save the contemporary act. The first section, then, ends with a plea for individual subjects to foster in their active existence the responsible participation that alone will keep life alive.

Life can be consciously comprehended only in concrete answerability. A philosophy of life can only be a moral philosophy. Life can be consciously comprehended only as an ongoing event, and not as Being qua a given. A life that has fallen away from answerability cannot have a philosophy; it is, in its very principle, fortuitous and incapable of being rooted. (TPA 56)

the autumn of Faustian culture, was projected in a way that even now one has to admit, for all its faults, is remarkably plausible.’ Geoffrey Hawthorn, Enlightenment and Despair: A History of Social Theory, Cambridge, 1976, pp. 178-79.
70 Spengler, Untergang, p. 41.
Bakhtin’s solution in the face of the degradation of experience in the wasteland of modern existence is a moral imperative. This imperative, distinct from Kant’s moral imperative, is rooted in the event of being, and hence it is non-categorical, since it is not interested in universally applicable laws but in specific situations. 

We must not allow our lives to fall away from answerability. Despite the apparent hopelessness of the situation of contemporary culture, this seems a simple solution. Furthermore, the situation is not so hopeless as at first it may seem. Bakhtin argues, as I have shown above, that the unity of culture and life can only be recreated in the unity of human activity. It follows from Bakhtin’s argument that every subject can participate — indeed is obliged to participate — in the recreation of that unity. Where history, as Spengler conceives of it, is powerless, responsible human participation holds the key to the renewal of life. This imperative is, moreover, modest in its demands. A change from an attitude of pride to an attitude of humble responsibility will reverse the eroding effect of inauthentic habitualization:

The tacit presupposition of life’s ritualism is not humility, but pride. One has to develop humility to the point of participating in person and being answerable in person. In attempting to understand our whole life as secret [Coates translates this as ‘masked’ which seems to make more sense] representation and every act we perform — as ritual act, we turn ourselves into impostors or pretenders. (TPA 52)

Bakhtin’s modest imperative does not ask us to do different things from what we do anyway; it simply asks us to do those things in a certain fashion. Thus, it is concerned with a way of acting rather than acts, with the process of positing rather

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72 Brandist argues that Bakhtin’s ethics in Toward a Philosophy of the Act come about, in part, through the appropriation of Simmel’s critique of the categorical imperative: ‘Simmel had transformed the Kantian concept of duty […] into the structure of individual experience. Rationally discerned obligation was now replaced by the sentiment, or feeling of obligation. This allowed Simmel to argue that what one is morally obliged to do is dependent on historical circumstances and that the “sentiment of obligation”, conscience, is the internalized promptings of social discipline.’ Brandist, The Bakhtin Circle, p. 37. Bakhtin’s objections to the abstract nature of the categorical imperative for the concrete individual do echo Simmel when the latter speaks of the ‘the indifference of the law for the individual’. Georg Simmel, ‘Das individuelle Gesetz: Ein Versuch über das Prinzip der Ethik’, in Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1909-1918, pp. 417-70 (425). Bakhtin also stresses the situational nature of ethics. It should, nevertheless, be clear that Bakhtin would object to the idea that the lebensphilosophische notion of empathetic sentiment [Einfühlung] could be the basis of ethics or that ethical obligation could be given by internalized social norms. This last suggestion would be an abdication of responsibility. Responsibility is a principle, even if it is not one that tends towards universal laws.
Bakhtin asks us to act in a manner that recognizes difference. Bakhtin asks us to act with love. Bakhtin speaks of love in the following terms:

The valued manifoldness of Being as human (as correlated with the human being) can present itself only to a loving contemplation. Only love is capable of holding and making fast all this multiformity and diversity, without losing and dissipating it, without leaving behind a mere skeleton of basic lines and sense-moments. Only un-self-interested love on the principle of “I love him not because he is good, but he is good because I love him,” only lovingly interested attention, is capable of generating a sufficiently intent power to encompass and retain the concrete manifoldness of Being, without impoverishing and schematizing it. An indifferent or hostile reaction is always a reaction that impoverishes and decomposes its object; it seeks to pass over the object in all its manifoldness, to ignore it or to overcome it. The very function of indifference biologically consists in freeing us from the manifoldness of Being, diverting us from what is inessential for us practically – a kind of economy or preservation from being dissipated in the manifoldness. And this is the function of forgetting as well.

The loving attitude does not impoverish or schematize the loved one. ‘I love him not because he is good.’ If one loves someone because he is good, one asserts the primacy of a general category over the specific particularity of the loved one.

73 An interpretation of Bakhtin’s conception of love from a theological standpoint runs though Coates, Christianity in Bakhtin. Coates also discusses Kagan’s conception of love and its relation to Bakhtin in Ruth Coates, ‘Two of a Small Fraternity? Points of Contact and Departure in the Work of Bakhtin and Kagan up to 1924’, in Shepherd (ed.), The Contexts of Bakhtin, pp. 17-28. Palmieri discusses Bakhtin’s conception of love and notes its debt to Scheler in Giovanni Palmieri, “The Author” According to Bakhtin... And Bakhtin the Author’, in Shepherd (ed.), The Contexts of Bakhtin, pp. 45-56 (54-55). Brandist also reveals the extent of the influence of Max Scheler on Bakhtin as regards the conception of self-other relations. Brandist makes frequent reference to this, particularly the conception of self-other relations, but does not say very much about Bakhtin’s conception of love. He is even able to refer to the notes that Bakhtin made on Scheler’s work. See Brandist, The Bakhtin Circle, pp. 36-52. Certainly, Scheler’s influence was strong. Scheler objects to those trends that see the essence of loving as a merging with the loved object. Instead, he describes love as an intersubjective act. The following, for example, is his interpretation of Augustine which also reflects his own views: ‘The appearance of an image or meaning in the intellectual act, even in the simplest perception, is for him not merely an activity of the knowing subject that penetrates the completed object. Rather an image is simultaneously an answering reaction of the object itself, a “giving of itself” or a “self-revealing” of the object. An image is a consequence of a “question” asked with “love” that the world answers and in so doing reveals itself. In this revelation the world comes to its full existence and value.’ Max Scheler, ‘Love and Knowledge’, in On Feeling, Knowing and Valuing, ed. and trans. by Harold Bershady, Chicago, 1992, pp. 147-65 (163-64). This passage contains a position that is close to Bakhtin’s.

74 Bakhtin’s conception of love is not subordinated to morality. Morality may be understood as a grouping of general categories. The maxim, ‘I love him not because he is good but he is good
The particularity of the loved one is seen through the prism of the general and the result is a flattening of that particularity. The difference that is inherent in that particularity is converted into the equivalence of a general value and hence erased. Love does not do this; it values difference and particularity. Indifference, then, is love's opposite: 'Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate sufficient power to slow down and linger intently over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute' (TPA 64). For indifference is the lovelessness, the unwillingness to participate, that erases difference.

Earlier in the essay Bakhtin has a passage in which the themes of love and indifference are bound together in a striking fashion:

That he is mortal, for example, acquires its value-sense only from my unique place, inasmuch as I die, my fellow-being dies, and all historical mankind dies. And, of course, the emotional-volitional, valuative sense of my death, of the death of an other who is dear to me, and the fact of any actual person's death are all profoundly different in each case, for all these are different moments in once-occurent Being-as-event. For a disembodied, detached (non-participating) subiectum, all deaths may be equal. No one, however, lives in a world in which all human beings are – with respect to value – equally mortal. (TPA 48)

In so far as I accept my participation in the world, I must accept the responsibility that I am not indifferent and that I engage evaluatively with others. I recognize my different evaluative and emotive responses to the imagined and real deaths of those around me. This is an attitude of love since it takes as its criterion of valuation those who are dear to me. Love produces a world that is variegated. Lovelessness, however, erases this difference. It transforms variegated deaths that are distinct in the evaluations attached to them into a series of undifferentiated equivalent units to which I am indifferent. Lovelessness and theoreticism are shown by Bakhtin as part of the same continuum. The link that Bakhtin makes between lovelessness, theoreticism and indifference to the particularity of deaths because I love him', allows the possibility that love might not conform to standard moral categories.
makes him a modern thinker of a century that, in theoreticism turned to radical evil, put technology in the service of genocide.\textsuperscript{75}

The loving attitude does not objectify the loved one. Love is interested, in one sense, as Bakhtin states, but it is also disinterested, (or rather, un-self-interested).\textsuperscript{76} Indifference objectifies the other; it also instrumentalizes the other, ignoring what is ‘inessential practically’. If I love someone because s/he is good then a possible implication is that I approach her as good for something, for some purpose that is external to her. If I love him or her and then, secondarily find that s/he is good, my focus remains on him or her. Love does not instrumentalize in this fashion, nor does it not seek to possess the other as an object.\textsuperscript{77} Rather, it respects the other as a subject. I, as a subject, am concrete and manifold. When I love, I do not reduce the loved one to an object; hence I preserve his or her subject-nature, that is, his or her concrete and manifold nature. This gives another dimension to the three architectonic categories that Bakhtin gives earlier in the essay. When, unlovingly, I act as I-for-myself, I encounter other subjects as

\textsuperscript{75}Once again, Arendt offers a point of comparison with Bakhtin’s thought. Arendt argues in \textit{The Human Condition} that human beings should not limit themselves to the abstraction of contemplation but rather at cultivating a \textit{vita activa}, since it is only in participation and action that we are capable of moral responsibility. Understood in this fashion, her account of Adolf Eichmann shows that the banality of evil is possible when human beings do not participate actively. For Arendt, Eichmann allowed what Bakhtin would term the pride of ritualism to overcome his individuality and hence he never thought critically - or did anything - about his complicity in the massacre of millions. See Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, and Hannah Arendt, \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil}, London, 1998. Mihailovic performs a more immediate contextualization of \textit{Toward a Philosophy of the Act} and the link between theoreticism and indifference to death, noting that it was written ‘in the aftermath of the Russian Civil War when thousands perished or gave their own lives for inflexibly held political principles’. Mihailovic, \textit{Corporeal Words}, p. 64.

\textsuperscript{76} It is the disinterested nature of aesthetic activity, in the sense meant by Kant with the term \textit{interessenlos}, that brings it close to loving activity.

\textsuperscript{77} This is one of the points where Bakhtin parts company with the existentialist ethics with which – in, for example, his emphasis on authentic being – he may seem to share common ground. Coates notes, for example, that ‘Bakhtin’s description of the pretender bears a striking resemblance to Sartre’s person living in bad faith’. Coates, ‘Bakhtin and Kagan’, p. 23. Sartre, however, conceives of love (on the analogy of sexual love) as the desire to possess, hence he conceives of love as an oscillation between love and hatred, of the desire to be possessed and to possess. See Jean-Paul Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology}, New York, 1954, pp. 339-430. For a discussion of this and, in particular, the lack of a Sartrean conception of shame in Bakhtin, as well as an assessment of hierarchy in ‘Author and Hero’, see Ann Jefferson, ‘Bodymatters: Self and Other in Bakhtin, Sartre and Barthes’, in Hirschkop and Shepherd (eds), \textit{Bakhtin and Cultural Theory}, pp. 152-57. The ultimate point of conflict between Bakhtin and Sartre must be, however, as Clark and Holquist point out, Sartre’s maxim that ‘hell is other people’. Clark and Holquist, \textit{Bakhtin}, p. 94.
objects, as others-for-me. When I love, however, I act as I-for-the other, preserving what is subject within the other. Nor do I lose my own subjectivity since I do not merge with him or her. This is the basis of Bakhtin’s intersubjective ethics: the world as a world made up of a multitude of different subjects rather than as a world made up of a mass of equivalent objects.

Loving the other in a humble and responsible fashion, not as an object but in such a fashion that her or his subjectivity is preserved and her or his manifold and concrete nature is recognized, means that I must adopt an attitude towards the other that is as close as possible to the attitude that I adopt towards my own subjectivity. This precept has a simple transcription: love your neighbour as yourself. Bakhtin makes this explicit in the final paragraph of the essay:

The concrete ought is an architectonic ought: the ought to actualize one’s unique place in once-occurent Being-as-event. And it is determined first and foremost as a contraposition of the I and the other… Whence it does not follow at all, of course, that the contraposition of I and the other has never been expressed and stated — this is, after all, the sense of all Christian morality, and it is the starting point for altruistic morality. But this [3 illegible words] principle of morality has still not found an adequate scientific expression, nor has it been thought through essentially and fully. (TPA 75)

The theological readings of Coates and Mihailovic do not draw this conclusion. Both are concerned to put Bakhtin’s ethics in the Christological setting of incarnation. Nevertheless, it seems inescapable that the whole thrust of Bakhtin’s essay is a secularized philosophical argument for a Christian ethics in a modern world.

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78 Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin*, for example, pp. 32-35. The whole of Mihailovic’s *Corporeal Words* reads Bakhtin with reference to the notion of incarnation. He deals with Toward a Philosophy of the Act on pp. 51-85.

79 Emerson and Morson dismiss a theological reading of Toward a Philosophy of the Act: ‘In contrast to those Russian — and Russian Orthodox — admirers of Bakhtin (including his editor Sergei Bocharov, and those Western commentators who have seen Bakhtin’s thought as essentially religious) the work barely touches on theology, except in one passage. [...] It would seem hard to justify the notion that Bakhtin’s works are, at least in the Western sense of the term, really a theology in code.’ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, ‘Introduction: Rethinking Bakhtin’, in Morson and Emerson (eds), *Rethinking Bakhtin*, pp. 1-60 (6). I argue that Bakhtin’s secular Christian ethics are plain to see here and not in code.
A key for understanding Bakhtin’s thinking here may be found in a thinker whose work seems, so far, not to have found resonance in Bakhtin scholarship: Thomas Hobbes. Given Bakhtin’s extreme disdain for acknowledgement, the fact that Bakhtin mentions Hobbes is striking. Bakhtin gives a brief but accurate summary of the central thrust of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1660):

> At one time man actually established all cultural values and now is bound by them. Thus the power of the people, according to Hobbes, is exercised at one time only, in the act of renouncing themselves to the ruler; after that the people become slaves of their own free decision. *(TPA 35)*

Bakhtin clearly objects to Hobbes’s notion of sovereignty. The Leviathan stands as the result of the final objectification of the cultural and theoretical sphere into a authoritarian political realm whose subjects, having relinquished all activity and all responsibility once and for all, are mere slaves. Nevertheless, Bakhtin’s and Hobbes’s thought display a similar structure, despite radical dissimilarities.80

Like Bakhtin, Hobbes’s work has as its basis an examination of experience.81 From his theoretical investigations into the nature of experience, he concludes that man lives in a fragmented and divided world.82 He argues from this that subjects must find some way of establishing a unity.83 The means by which Hobbes argues that such a unity can be established is by following an

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80 The link that Hobbes makes between authorship and authority, in Chapter XVI, ‘Of Persons, Authors and Things Personated’, finds a resonance in Bakhtin’s thinking on the same themes in ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard Tuck, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 111-15. One might also argue for the importance of Hobbes’s philosophy of language to Bakhtin and, perhaps, Voloshinov. Using arguments that bear comparison with Voloshinov’s distinction between theme and meaning (which I discuss in the next chapter), Hobbes argues that meaning is not a fixed property of words but rather that speakers’ evaluative judgements, based on their desire for power and their own gain, are the basis of signification. See Hobbes, Chapter IV, ‘Of Speech’, *Leviathan*, pp. 24-31, where Hobbes develops a theory of language in which signification is determined by evaluation.

81 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapters 1-XI.


imperative, the central, second law of nature from which all the other laws are derived:

From this Fundamentall Law of Nature, by which men are commanded to endeavour Peace, is derived this second Law; That a man be willing, when others are so too, as farre-forth, as for Peace, and defence of himselfe he shall think necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himselfe... This is the Law of the Gospell; *Whatsoever you require that other should do to you, that do ye to them.* And that Law of all men, *Quod tibi fieri non vis, alteri ne feceris.*

Hobbes, whose narrative of human nature has nothing to do with a biblical narrative, manages to bring the ‘Law of the Gospell’ and the ‘Law of all men’ into a relationship of concordance without inserting a theological element into his secular argument. In a similar fashion, Bakhtin’s *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* attempts to give Christ’s new commandment an ‘adequate scientific expression’ and to think it through ‘essentially and fully’ on a secular basis.

There is, however, a profound difference between Hobbes and Bakhtin on this point. Whilst Hobbes’s law of nature does not have the force of a law of nature as the terms would be used by Kant, it is nevertheless, Hobbes implies, a maxim or imperative that men and women will, in the course of time and with experience, see that it is in their best interest to follow. Thus, Hobbes, despite his initially negative characterization of human nature, can be seen to contain an unexpected optimism. This is not the case for Bakhtin. In Bakhtin’s tragedy of culture as described in the admittedly unfinished work, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, his imperative for responsible activity remains no more than a plea.

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3. Benjamin's Crisis of Experience

Many critics have noted Benjamin's use of the terms Erlebnis and Erfahrung. Few, however, have recognized the extent to which Benjamin develops a theory of different modes of experience that emerges from his early engagement with Simmel and notions of the tragedy of culture. Jay, however, traces this heritage and comments, in such a way that Benjamin's kinship with Bakhtin should be immediately clear, that what set Benjamin apart from his immediate predecessors in German thought, people like Dilthey and Husserl, 'was his disdain for both the alleged immediacy and meaningfulness of Erlebnis and the overly rational, disinterested version of Erfahrung defended by the positivists and the neo-Kantians'. One reason for critics' slowness to point out this connection is that Benjamin's use of these terms can be confusing. Benjamin takes from Simmel and the lebensphilosophische tradition a notion of the split between Erlebnis and Erfahrung. The confusion arises from the fact that the synthetic mode of experience that Benjamin proposes as a solution to this tragedy is itself termed by Benjamin a qualified form of Erfahrung. This, however, should not blind the reader to the fact that Benjamin shares with Bakhtin the same view on the limits of Erfahrung in the traditional, Kantian sense. In its place, Benjamin seeks a variety of forms of Erfahrung which are qualified in various ways, depending on the context in which he is writing: as 'future', 'higher', 'absolute', 'disappearing', and 'narratable'.

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86 See, for example, Beatrice Hansen, 'Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin's Work', in Ferris (ed.), Companion to Benjamin, pp. 54-72 (70-71); Thomas Weber, 'Erfahrung', in Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (eds.), Benjamins Begriffe, Frankfurt/Main, 2000, pp. 230-59; taking one example: in his generally perspicacious study, McCole devotes seven pages to the question of 'just what is actually responsible for the mutual exclusivity of Erlebnis and Erfahrung', without exploring the intellectual-historical context of the 'tragedy of culture' which would provide much in the way of an answer. McCole, Benjamin, pp. 272-79.

87 Jay, 'Experience without a Subject', p. 195. Plate is another critic who, apparently independently of Jay, recognizes this aspect of Benjamin's thought and its debt to the confrontation of Kantianism and Lebensphilosophie: 'Benjamin was not content with either [Erfahrung or Erlebnis] – the former being too rationalistic and pragmatically impossible to render in a modern age of shock, the latter being too immediate and individualistic – and so instead he sets up a dialectic between the two varieties of experience, attempting to overcome the subject-object distinction'. Plate, Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics, p. 4.
Whilst Benjamin rejects much of Kant, then, he still uses *Erfahrung* as the term for a synthesis of the particularity of *Erlebnis* with some other quality, as had Kant. The difference lies in Benjamin’s rejection of the notion that this other quality in *Erfahrung* is universality. Benjamin tends to substitute for Kant’s ‘universality’ the term ‘narratable’ (*mitteilbar*). Narratability lies somewhere between the particular and the universal: it is common to a number of subjects as communication, hence not particular, but restricted historically and culturally, hence not universal. It is the notion of narratability that explains Benjamin as the philosopher of language and the literary and art critic; an analysis of historically and culturally located artistic works yields a view of the central quality of narratability.

In the academic year 1912-13, Benjamin was, as we have seen, at the University of Berlin. Here, as well as attending the lectures of Simmel and others, he became deeply involved in a wide range of student and youth associations. It was in this context that he contributed to the journal, *Der Anfang*. In the opening paragraph of an article in the August 1913 issue, Benjamin writes as follows:

> The present accuses those whose souls are most powerfully inhabited by a feeling of a future task [*Aufgabe*] of being ‘lacking in a sense of history’. For this is what they call a sense of the definite, not the indefinite, a sense of the given [*das Gegebene*], not the posited [*das Aufgegebene*]. So strong is its sense of history, this sense of facts, restraint and caution, that the present is probably most especially poor in actual ‘historical ideas’. These it generally calls ‘Utopias’ and has them fail in the face of the ‘eternal laws’ of nature. It rejects a task that cannot be contained by a programme of reform, a task that demands a new movement of spirits and a radical new way of seeing. (GS II 57)

This was followed by a piece, more a manifesto of the youth movement than an article, in the October issue. The piece bears the title ‘Erfahrung’:

> In our fight for responsibility, we fight against someone who is masked. The mask of the adult is called experience [*Erfahrung*]. It is expressionless, impenetrable, and ever the same. The adult has already experienced [*erlebt*] everything [...]. We have not yet

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88 Benjamin was one of the founder members of the ‘Detachment for School Reform’, on the committee of the Free Students’ Union, lecturing on behalf of the ‘League for Free School Communities’ and still in regular contact with his mentor, the educational reformer, Gustav Wyneken (1875-1964). See Brodersen, *Benjamin*, pp. 46-49.
experienced \textit{erfahren} anything. [...] That is what they have experienced, this one thing, never anything different: the meaninglessness of Life. Its brutality. Have they ever yet encouraged us to anything great or new or forward-looking? Oh no, precisely because these are things one cannot experience. (\textit{GS II} 54; \textit{SW I} 3)

Beneath the youthful, provocative rhetoric of these two statements, which one can take together, lie the germs of Benjamin’s life-long meditation on the nature of experience. Furthermore, we notice some points in common with Bakhtin’s notion of experience in \textit{Toward a Philosophy of the Act}.

As in Bakhtin’s critique of theoreticism in the contemporary crisis of the act, Benjamin describes a form of experience (\textit{Erfahrung}) that is characterized by its regularity and repeatability, its habitual nature, its conformity to ‘eternal laws’, and its sense of the given (\textit{das Gegebene}). This experience erases difference, representing always the one thing (\textit{das Eine}), and never anything different (\textit{das Andere}). This experience is expressionless (\textit{ausdruckslos}) and unchanging like a mask. Thus, like the ritualism of Bakhtin’s impostor, the mask of \textit{Erfahrung} is a way of disclaiming responsibility. Similarly, \textit{Erfahrung} is impenetrable (\textit{undurchdringlich}); it neutralizes participation. Benjamin’s conception of \textit{Erfahrung} brings to our attention an aspect of Bakhtin’s notion of theoreticism which I have not yet commented on. \textit{Erfahrung} is characterized by restraint (\textit{Gebundenheit}) and caution (\textit{Vorsicht}). Bakhtin argues similarly that if we are governed by theoreticism ‘we would have cast ourselves out of life – as answerable, risk-fraught, and open becoming’ (\textit{TPA} 9). The theoreticism of \textit{Erfahrung} excludes the risk of life. Finally, Benjamin argues that \textit{Erfahrung} results in the acceptance of brutality – an idea that is close to Bakhtin’s idea that theoreticism is indifferent to death. Benjamin also brings new themes to this discussion. First, Benjamin establishes a parallel between ontogenesis and phylogenesis. \textit{Erfahrung} is the experience of the adult. The process of becoming adult is a process of the ossification of true experience, just as there is a historical ossification of experience.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{89} The themes of childhood, youth, and the nature of experience - which seem not to have a parallel in Bakhtin’s writings - are a feature of Benjamin’s entire career which occur for example, in his writings on toys, on childrens’ literature, on mimesis, and in his autobiographical texts.
This early Benjamin differs radically from Bakhtin, however, in his vitalism and, indeed, Decadence:

Nothing is so hateful to the philistine as the ‘dreams of his youth’ [...]. And most of the time sentimentality is the protective camouflage of his hatred. For what appeared to him in his dreams was the voice of the spirit [Geist], which once called him just as it calls every man. Youth is the eternal, reproachful reminder of this. That is why he combats it. He tells the young of that grim, overwhelming experience [Erfahrung] and teaches the young man to laugh at himself [...]. Again: we know of another experience [Erfahrung]. It can be hostile to spirit and destructive to many blossoming dreams [Blütenträume]. Nevertheless it is the most beautiful, most intangible, most incommunicable, since it can never be without spirit as long as we remain young. As Zarathustra says, the individual can experience [erlebt] himself only at the end of his wanderings. The Philistine has his ‘experience’ [Erfahrung]; it is the eternal one of spiritlessness [Geisteslosigkeit]. The young man will experience [erleben] Spirit [...]. (GS II 56; SW I 4-5)

This passage, in its celebration of the possibility of destruction of illusion (the Blütenträume), in its hostility to spirit (Geist) that paradoxically preserves spirit from the spiritlessness (Geisteslosigkeit) of the Philistine, and in its rejection of sentimentality, strongly echoes Nietzsche. It echoes not only Nietzsche’s Thus Spake Zarathustra (1883-85) but also The Genealogy of Morals (1887) and its noble barbarian, free from social constraints, who constitutes the antithesis to nihilistic, ressentiment-bound, mediocre, contemporary humanity.⁹⁰ Thus, whilst he speaks of the youth movement’s need for ‘another form of experience’ (eine andere Erfahrung), Benjamin here, in Nietzschean and lebensphilosophische mode, may be seen to be championing Erlebnis.

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⁹⁰ See Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘The Genealogy of Morals’, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann, New York, 1992, 451-599, especially pp. 475-80. This is the passage that discusses the infamous blonde Bestie. One can discern in Benjamin’s text not only the influence of Nietzsche but also perhaps of Decadence. The opposition of the destructive and rejuvenating Barbarian and enervated and sterile philistine civilization is a standard topos of Decadence from Verlaine’s ‘La Langueur’ onwards.
Benjamin’s uncritical enthusiasm for *Erlebnis* will be subjected to thoroughgoing revision.\(^{91}\) One point remains, however, to be drawn from this essay on experience. In this essay, Benjamin draws out of the term *Erfahrung* a shade of meaning that becomes central to his later thinking on experience. The German word *Erfahrung* carries a sense of the transmissibility of experience. What one has learned [*erfahren*], one can also teach or pass on as tradition.\(^{92}\) In the example here, the adult generation attempts to pass on its experience in the form of *Erfahrung*. This is the bitter and conservative ‘experience’ of the adult who, in saying, ‘don’t attempt to change anything; I thought about trying as a young man and I failed’, presents the world as immutable. Here, the form of tradition that is passed from adults to the younger generation is authoritarian. In the face of this authoritarian conservative tradition of *Erfahrung*, the necessary force of destruction is represented by the barbarous revolt of youth and the vitalism of *Erlebnis*.

Benjamin revises this position in his later critique of *Lebensphilosophie*, an expression of which can be found in a review-article, ‘Theories of German Fascism’. Published in 1930, it deals with a collection of rightist mémoires of the experience of the First World War, edited by Ernst Jünger. As we have seen, Jünger and his comrades had seen in war the expression of a vibrant if brutal *Urerlebnis* and a radical rejection of the ossified and exhausted forms of modern, bourgeois experience. They implicitly identify with the aristocratic barbarian of the Decadent and Nietzschean imagination. Benjamin recognizes this association: ‘The most rabidly decadent origins of this new theory of war are emblazoned on their foreheads: it is nothing other than an uninhibited translation of the principles of *l’art pour l’art* to war itself’ (*GS III* 240; *SW II* 314).\(^{93}\) The celebration of the

\(^{91}\) Benjamin revisits the notion of a positive barbarism in the essay of 1933, ‘Experience and Poverty’. By this point, however, his ideas have been purged of vitalism. See *GS II* 213-29; *SW II* 731-36.

\(^{92}\) This sense of *Erfahrung* is already implicit in Kant’s use of the term: Kant’s *Erfahrung* is universal as opposed to the singularity of *Erlebnisse*; hence it must be communicable.

\(^{93}\) Here, then, Benjamin first introduces the idea, to be worked out more fully in the ‘The Work of Art’, that fascism is the aestheticization of politics. Benjamin points to the connection between Jünger’s celebration of experience and an aristocratic standpoint with a quotation: ‘With the mobilization of the masses, of worse blood, of those with a bourgeois sensibility, in short of the common man, especially into the ranks of the officers, more and more of the eternally aristocratic elements of the soldierly craft have been destroyed’ (*GS III* 240-41; *SW II* 314). As Benjamin
rawness of life, then, in Benjamin’s reading, results in fact in a transfiguration of life into the aesthetic. Benjamin makes a similar criticism of Lebensphilosophie in ‘On some Motifs in Baudelaire’:

Since the end of the last century, philosophy has made a series of attempts to lay hold of ‘true’ experience as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses. These efforts are usually classified under the rubric of Lebensphilosophie. Their point of departure, understandably enough, was not the individual’s existence in society. Instead, they have evoked poetry [Dichtung], or preferably nature, and, most recently, the age of myths. Dilthey’s book Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung represents one of the earliest of these efforts, which culminate with Klages and Jung, who made common cause with fascism. (GS I 608; SW IV 314)

Lebensphilosophie, by ignoring ‘the individual’s existence in society’, ends in a conception of life as a hypostatized mythical nature which, paradoxically, excludes life itself. This constitutes its kinship with fascism. Similarly, the vitalist Jünger believes that he is celebrating the life of man. In reducing his conception of the life of man to the biological and animal, however, the true essence of life escapes him and the experience which he champions is no more than aesthetically produced illusion.

Benjamin argues that these rightist theorists of war have failed to understand the true nature of their subject. In their focus on the archetypal, aristocratic individual warrior who rediscovered in war a lost Urerlebnis, they fail to capture the specificity of this war with its massed ranks of modern men. In their emphasis on the eternal nature of war, which they wrap up in archaic, cultic rhetoric, Jünger et al. fail to recognize the essentially historical and modern nature of war. The historical and modern nature of war is to be found in its relationship to technology:

War – the ‘eternal war’ that they talk about so much here, as well as the most recent one – is said to be the highest manifestation of the German nation. It should be clear that behind their ‘eternal’ war is concealed the idea of cultic war, just as behind the most recent war hides the idea of technological war; and it should also be clear that

comments, this is at best a tactless thing to say in view of the numbers of ordinary soldiers who died.
these authors have had little success in perceiving these relationships. (GS III 241-42; SW II 314-15)

The relationship of technology to modern ('imperialist') war is described by Benjamin as follows:

Without going too deeply into the significance of the economic causes of war, one might say that the harshest, most disastrous aspects of imperialist war are in part the result of the gaping discrepancy between the gigantic means of technology and the miniscule moral illumination it affords. Indeed, according to its economic nature, bourgeois society cannot help insulating everything technological as much as possible from the so called spiritual, and it cannot help resolutely excluding technology's right of determination in the social order. Any future war will also be a slave revolt [Sklavenaufstand] of technology. (GS III 238; SW II 313)

Here we see a creative synthesis of Simmel's notion of the tragedy of culture and Marx's theory of the fetish-character of the commodity. Benjamin attributes the particular, modern, brutal power of war to two, mutually reinforcing sources: the crushing weight of an objective culture that has been divorced from the subjective realm, and a commodity society where fetishized products control their creators. As for Bakhtin in Toward a Philosophy of the Act, so for Benjamin, technology, the product of objective culture, has become separate from human beings' subjective and volitional activity with devastating consequences.

The abyss between subjective and objective culture neutralizes subjective activity in such a way that any objections we might have to make, whether about the forms of social organization or the moral justification for war, are irrelevant. Hence, just as Marx argues that in commodity form, which determines the capitalist mode of production, the products of our collective activity come to be animated and exercise control over their creators, so here in war technology rebels against its owners. The correct relationship between man, technology and nature has been violently inverted. As Benjamin puts it in the 'The Work of Art':

[...] the destruction caused by war furnished proof that society was not sufficiently developed to master the elemental forces of society.

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94 There is also, in the term Sklavenaufstand, an implied reference to Nietzsche.
95 Benjamin may echo here Lukács's identification of the static attitude of contemplation - which he attributes both to Kant's philosophy and the attitude of the worker in front of a machine - as a defining feature of reified consciousness. See Lukács, 'Reification'.

Imperialistic war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in 'human material' for the natural material society has denied it. Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities. (GS I 507-08; SW IV 270)

Jünger’s celebration of the subjective sphere gives a mythologizing justification to this total and annihilating victory of objective culture as technology. With technology set free for barbarism, modern war, in the age of technological capitalism, is the final act in the tragedy of culture.

In his essay on theories of fascism, Benjamin does not attack simply the mythologizing forces of Jünger’s vitalism. Benjamin also locates what Leslie terms an ‘ethical aporia’ in the Idealist philosophy that Benjamin treats as capitalism’s philosophical counterpart and that we might associate with Bakhtin’s theoreticism. The generalizing and abstracting forces of Idealism are held responsible for their complete inability to account for the material aspect of existence, a material aspect which comes shockingly to the fore in the ripped-open bodies of the battlefield:

It should be said as bitterly as possible: in the face of this ‘landscape of total mobilization’, the German feeling for nature has had an undreamed-of upsurge. The pioneers of peace, who settle nature in so sensuous a manner, were evacuated from these landscapes, and as far as anyone could see over the edge of the trench, the surrounding had become the terrain of German Idealism; every shell crater had become a problem, every wire entanglement an antinomy, every barb a definition, every explosion a thesis. (GS III 247; SW II 318-19)

Kantian idealism cannot account for the brutally material nature of this world. It transforms it into an abstract language of ethical justification which bypasses its intense materiality. The categorical imperative with its emphasis on universal laws does not deal with a concrete war, hence it can be complicit in allowing it to happen and even in justifying it on abstract ethical grounds. The ravaged landscape of the trenches is a transformed but familiar version of Kant’s ethical

96 Leslie, Walter Benjamin, p. 33. Leslie’s study contains a sustained reading of Benjamin’s theory of fascism which seeks to explain Benjamin’s turn to Marxist materialism. Whilst I agree with Leslie’s reading in a number of respects, I seek to emphasize that Benjamin’s concern with the concrete nature of experience is more than simply part of a turn to a necessarily Marxist materialism.
landscape. Benjamin stresses the compatibility of Kantian ethics and totally mobilized war in the continuation of the words quoted above: ‘by day the sky was the cosmic interior of the steel helmet, and at night the moral law above’ (*GS III* 247; *SW II* 319) - a bitter travesty of Kant.\(^\text{97}\)

This image of the desolate landscape of the trenches where Kant’s starry firmament has become the inside of a helmet and the moral law is suspended in the fearful night of the battlefield is a prelude to a passage in ‘The Storyteller’:

Experience [*Erfahrung*] has fallen in value. [...] Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent - not richer but poorer in communicable experience? What poured out in the flood of war books ten years later was anything but experience that can be shared orally. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and, beneath those clouds, in a force-field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body. (*GS II* 439; *SW III* 143-44)

Modern war with its bombardment of shock and its flood of fragmented bodily experience (*Erlebnis*) displaces the subject and brings about an absolute break with tradition and the possibility of communicable experience (*mitteilbare Erfahrung*). The mechanism whereby the psyche transforms that which has been

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\(^{97}\)The passage to which Benjamin refers here is the opening lines of the conclusion to Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788): ‘Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within.’ The passage continues with a striking description of the way in which the synthetic activity of practical reason conjoins the universal and the particular; on the one hand, in practical reason our sense experience and animal being are validated in universal terms; and the realm of the universal receives the weight of actual experience. My orientation towards the laws of nature ‘begins from the place I occupy in the external world of sense, and enlarges my connection therein to an unbounded extent with worlds upon worlds and systems of systems’. My orientation towards universal moral laws ‘exhibits me in a world which has true infinity, but which is traceable only by the understanding, and with which I discern that I am not in a merely contingent but in a universal and necessary connection’. Kant, thus, establishes a harmonious and dynamic relationship of communication between the realm of universal laws of nature, the realm of universal laws of morality and the individual cognizing consciousness that inhabits a sensual world. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Moral Writings* (1788), trans. by Lewis White Beck, Chicago IL, 1948, p. 351.
lived through (erlebt) into experience that can be communicated (Erfahrung) has ceased to function as a result of an overload of the sensory apparatus. In ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, Benjamin expands this notion to account for the role of shock experience in urban life. Drawing on Freud’s theory from Beyond the Pleasure Principle on the psychical mechanism for dealing with trauma, he suggests that:

the greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience [Erfahrung], tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour of one’s life [Erlebnis]. Perhaps the special achievement of shock defence may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents. (GS I 615; SW IV 319)

Nevertheless, it is not only the change in the nature of Erlebnis, the material and random shocks of life, that makes communicable experience impossible. The objective structures of the modern world themselves have been transformed by technology in the broadest sense. Technology transforms strategy into tactics and economic experience into inflation. Processes of urbanization and the development of increasingly complex structures of social organization create the environment of urban shock. Thus, it is also the changed, organized structures of objective culture that displace the subject.

The contrast between the human, whose frail physicality in a world of violent flux is highlighted in ‘The Storyteller’, and the unchanging heavens is an absolute contrast between the particular and the general. That is to say: a participative relationship between man and nature has been recast in terms of fixed antinomies between the given realm of nature and the posited fragility of being. Hence, Benjamin’s statement on the uselessness of modern Erlebnis for communicable experience is also a statement on the powerlessness of Kantian Erfahrung: whilst the tripartite structure of Kantian experience [Erfahrung] persists – sense experience, universal law and the embodied subject – the

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98 Another source of this insight is Simmel’s theory of the modern, urban blasé attitude in ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’.
99 Wolin makes this point in Wolin, Benjamin, p. 218.
communication between these three coordinates no longer functions. Sense
experience and abstract cognition have been forced apart and a synthesis of the
two in the *mitteilbare Erfahrung* of narrative is impossible.

This is a crisis of experience, a division between two modes of experience
which cannot be brought together. In the modern world, sources of an experience
that would make sense of the world in a universal and communicable fashion
(*Erfahrung*), whether these be the communal, narratable experience of storytelling
or the theoretical, moral experience of the Kantian tradition, are no longer
accessible and no longer relevant. The structure of experience of this sort has
dissolved in the incomprehensible workings of technological capitalism. On the
contrary, *Erlebnis* (now transformed by those same workings of technological
capitalism into the mere shock of isolated and apparently unrelated events that act
directly on the body) has become the norm. This is, in Benjamin’s various
descriptions, the experience of the trenches, the syncopated, dislocating rhythm of
the factory, the jostle of the crowd and the rush of traffic in the big city, the swift
inter-cutting of images in the montage technique of cinema, the click of the
camera that isolates a moment, the flare of a match, or the juxtapositions of
articles on the page of a newspaper. The increase in the power and frequency of
*Erlebnisse qua* shock and the subsequent development of mechanisms to combat
shock bring about what Benjamin diagnoses as the modern atrophy of experience
(*Erfahrung*).

In their treatment of Benjamin’s conception of experience, critics do not
focus on the fact that the atrophy of *Erfahrung* is paralleled by a degradation of
*Erlebnis*. Nevertheless, both facets of experience have been flung apart and both
have suffered in the process. If we look back to *Lebensphilosophie*, we shall
remember that *Erlebnis* constituted for thinkers such as Simmel, Dilthey and
Bergson a form of intense subjectivity. Bergson’s intuition, for example, might
be loosely paraphrased as what one ‘knows in one’s bones’, one’s ‘gut feelings’,
before one subjects it to the faculty of reason. If we compare this notion of
intense subjectivity with Benjamin’s notion of *Erlebnis*, it will be clear that, in
Benjamin’s analysis, an immense historical shift has occurred. Intense
subjectivity has been replaced by intense objectivity; the body, far from ‘knowing things in its bones’ or having ‘gut feelings’ as a pre-rational form of subjectivity, has become an object, buffeted about by the shocks prepared for it by the modern world. The new forms of \textit{Erfahrung}, that are the object of Benjamin’s search, can never be \textit{Erfahrung} in the Kantian sense of the term, however, as will be made clear in the next section.\footnote{Gasché, however, makes a case for the presence of Kantian motifs in the ‘The Work of Art’, commenting: ‘Benjamin’s borrowings from Kant [in the ‘The Work of Art’] do not exclude his rejection of major aspects of Kant’s doctrine. [...] The contention that Benjamin objected to the unifying gesture of transcendental deduction, to what he called Kant’s despotism, in other words, to his transcendentalism, is highly suggestive of what sort of Kant – a Kant folded back into the empirical, a criticist economy without transcendentalism – is operative in Benjamin’s work.’ Rodolph Gasché, ‘Objective Diversions: On Some Kantian Themes in Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction”’, in Andrew Benjamin and Osborne (eds), \textit{Benjamin’s Philosophy}, pp.183-204 (201-02).} They will have to be capable of avoiding the pitfalls of Kant as well as capable of assimilating this new and degraded form of \textit{Erlebnis}.

4. Beyond Crisis: A New and Higher Form of Experience

Benjamin’s most systematic treatment of the limitations of Kantian experience is to be found in his early text, ‘On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy’ (1918). This essay bears many similarities with Bakhtin’s \textit{Toward a Philosophy of the Act}, being both an attempt to go beyond the dominant Kantian tradition and searching for a philosophy yet to come.\footnote{Hirschkop mentions, in passing, the similarity between Bakhtin and Benjamin’s ‘On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy’ in Hirschkop, \textit{Bakhtin}, p. 100.} Unlike Bakhtin, Benjamin does not rework Kant by countering Kant’s analysis of experience and cognition with a phenomenological account of the experience of the subject; rather, Benjamin works from within and attempts to expand Kant’s framework. This essay is more, however, than a critique of Kant. McCole comments:

\begin{quote}
[Benjamin’s] interest in systematically extending Kant’s theory of experience aimed not only at overcoming Kant’s exclusive orientation of epistemology toward the mathematical natural sciences but also – perhaps more so – at recapturing the full range of experience from the monopoly being surrendered by default to the vitalist right.\footnote{McCole, \textit{Benjamin}, p. 76.}
\end{quote}

The ‘coming philosophy’ that Benjamin calls for here is a philosophy that will go beyond the tragedy of culture as represented by the split between Kantianism and vitalist irrationalism.
In Benjamin’s view, Kant’s fundamental mistake is to be traced to the unconscious historical parochialism that undermines his claim to construct a theory of knowledge that would be universally valid. Kant’s epistemology is defined in relation to a distinct form of experience, which Benjamin describes in the following terms as:

the conception of the naked, self-evident experience, which for Kant, as a man who somehow shared the horizon of his times, seemed to be the only experience given, indeed, the only experience possible. This experience, however, [...] was unique and temporally limited. (GS II 158; SW I 101)

Kant defines knowledge in relation to his own epoch’s narrow notion of Newtonian mathematical and scientific empirical experience. Hence, he limits himself to an equally narrow conception of the world accessible to knowledge. The notion of experience that results is, in Benjamin’s view, impoverished.103 ‘The very fact that Kant was able to commence his immense work under the constellation of the Enlightenment indicates that his work was on the basis of an experience virtually reduced to a nadir, to a minimum of significance.’ This Newtonian conception of experience in which the world is law-bound and calculable is, in Benjamin’s view, ‘one of lowest forms of experience or views of the world’ (GS II 159; SW I 101). Kant had excluded knowledge of the noumenal from his epistemology, since, in so far as the noumenal transcends the bounds of Newtonian experience, claims to knowledge of this sphere must remain hollow and ungrounded, a succumbing to metaphysical illusion. Yet, for Benjamin, any theory of knowledge that relinquishes its claim to metaphysics and knowledge of the noumenal is not worth its name. A theory of knowledge based on the prosaic

103 Hermann Cohen, the leading Marburg neo-Kantian, whose Kants Theorie der Erfahrung (1918) was a source for both Bakhtin and Benjamin, only underlined the Kantian mathematical bias. In Jennings’s words: ‘Cohen attempted to confirm the continuing validity of Kant’s description of the structure of the understanding. For Cohen, however, modern philosophy could “delineate in a positive manner the horizons of knowledge” only by severely restricting “the concept of the possibility of experience,” for example, by limiting the data of experience to a model of the world based solely on verifiable mathematical and scientific evidence.’ Jennings, Dialectical Images, p. 84. For Cohen’s influence on the early Bakhtin, see Nikolai Nikolaev, ‘The Nevель School of Philosophy (Bakhtin, Kagan and Pumianskii) between 1918 and 1925: Materials from Pumianskii’s Archives’, in Shepherd (ed.), The Contexts of Bakhtin, pp. 29-41. Brandist also deals frequently with Bakhtin’s debt to Cohen in Brandist, The Bakhtin Circle.
regularities of the phenomenal world promotes a conception of existence that Benjamin dubs inferior.

Benjamin’s criticisms of Kant’s theory of experience, then, are, in part, similar to Bakhtin’s critique of theoreticism. Benjamin also criticizes the abstracted and repeatable nature of Kant’s image of experience. Similarly, Benjamin criticizes the inability of Kantian philosophy to account for the intersubjective nature of being. Benjamin argues that Kant’s desire to move epistemology away from the slippery ground of metaphysical speculation is itself prey to what he terms a ‘metaphysical blindness’. This metaphysical blindness of Kant stems, in Benjamin’s view, from his assumption that knowledge can only be conceived of in terms of the relation between subject and object. This assumption, Benjamin argues, is a result of Kant’s bias towards a human empirical consciousness that encounters the world as a knowing subject confronted with the objects of its knowledge: ‘The subject nature of this cognizing consciousness stems from the fact that it is formed in analogy to the empirical consciousness, which of course has objects confronting it’ (*GS II* 161; *SW I* 103).

In Benjamin’s view, for philosophy to do justice to the fullness of being, what is necessary is a ‘new and higher form of experience that is yet to come [einer noch kommenden neuen und höhern Art der Erfahrung]’ (*GS II* 161; *SW I* 103). By way of an anticipation of such a form of experience, Benjamin describes modes of experience in which subjects encounter the world in a fashion in which the boundary between subject and object is not rigidly patrolled:

We know of primitive peoples of the so-called preanimistic stage who identify themselves with sacred animals and plants and name themselves after them; we know of insane people who likewise identify themselves in part with objects of their perception, which are thus no longer objects placed before them; we know of sick people who do not relate the sensations of their bodies to themselves, but rather to other beings, and of clairvoyants who at least claim to be able to feel the sensations of others as their own. (*GS II* 161-62; *SW I* 103)

These modes of experience are modes which do not comply with the precepts of modern reason, least of all modern empirical science. Modern (Kantian) reason would classify these ways of viewing the world as mythologies. And yet,
Benjamin argues, in so far as a modern, rational worldview is blind to its own limitations, it is as much a mythology. These non-rational modes of experience, however, imply a possible approach with which to challenge narrowly instrumental reason that conceives of a strict boundary between the knowing subject and the objects of that knowledge. Benjamin’s new and higher form of experience shares the same aim as Bakhtin’s responsible activity: it resists the reduction of the world to a series of passive and repeatable objects; rather, it seeks to preserve the subject-nature of both knowing subject and the subjects which that subject confronts.

In this early essay, exactly what this new and higher form of experience might be is not precisely defined; it is, after all, only ‘coming’ and Benjamin is clearer on what it is not and what it should be able to encompass, than on positive definitions. One remembers, similarly, that Bakhtin’s early essay is less than full in his description of the practical sources which human beings may draw on to engage in responsible participation. Benjamin gives us an indication, however, towards the end of the essay: ‘the great transformation and correction which must be performed upon the concept of experience [Erfahrung], oriented so one-sidedly along mathematical-mechanical lines, can be attained only by relating knowledge to language [...]’ (GS II 168; SW I 107-08). Benjamin’s argument is that Kant’s mathematical bias and his desire for the abstract universality and certainty of the mathematical formula means that he ignores the fact that human experience is always articulated in language:

For Kant, the consciousness that philosophical knowledge was absolutely certain and a priori, the consciousness of that aspect of philosophy in which it is fully the peer of mathematics, ensured that he devoted almost no attention to the fact that all philosophical knowledge has its unique expression in language and not in formulas or numbers. (GS II 168; SW I 108)

104 Wolin reads ‘On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy’ as a proto-Surrealist text that points to Benjamin’s later work, and there is no doubt that this passage can be read as an example of that tendency. It shows Benjamin’s continuing preoccupation with phenomena which cannot be subsumed to a Western rationalist viewpoint. See Richard Wolin, ‘Benjamin, Adorno and Surrealism’, in Tim Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (eds), The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory, London, 1999, pp. 93-122. Nevertheless, Benjamin is not proposing irrationalism; his concern is that philosophy’s understanding of the rational must expand to take into account what is normally dismissed as irrational.
Bakhtin has a similar insight into the importance of language to responsible participation. ‘Historically language grew up in the service of participative thinking and performed acts, and it begins to serve abstract thinking only in the present day of its history’ (TPA 31). Bakhtin argues, similarly to Benjamin, that there is an aspect of language that resists abstraction and might be the source of responsible participation.

In the next chapter, I shall show how both Bakhtin and Benjamin come to seek in language the model for what they have termed respectively ‘responsible participation’ and a ‘higher form of experience’. First, however, I shall examine the extent to which Benjamin’s responses to the crisis of experience may be compatible with Bakhtin’s ethics of a non-categorical imperative, discussed above.

**Politics and Ethics**

Unlike the early Bakhtin, Benjamin is not obviously a philosopher of ethics. Rochlitz sums up the debate over the ethical dimension of Benjamin’s thought as follows:

In Benjamin’s work, the contemporary debate on ethics is confronted with a mode of thought situated to one side of what seems to have become its immutable framework, the opposition between Kantians and Aristotelians or Hegelians. Here again, Benjamin occupies a peculiar place: he is claimed both by thinkers who, like Ricoeur, lean toward a neo-Aristotelian philosophy and an anchoring of ethics in narration, and by those who, like Habermas, defend a procedural ethics of narration. How are such contradictory claims possible? We find very little moral theory in Benjamin; thus the two sides can draw support only from his intuitions and implicit presuppositions.\(^{105}\)

Benjamin’s thought seems to contain so little moral theory because of the perspective of actuality that Benjamin assumes.\(^{106}\) The demand of actuality is that we must not forget our relationship to our present. From the standpoint of

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\(^{106}\) Wohlfarth describes Benjamin’s notion of actuality as the utopian mean between journalism and philosophy: ‘The philosopher’s spurious claim “to master from lofty vantage-point, the intellectual horizon of the times”, does no more justice to true actuality, in Benjamin’s view, than does the journalist’s unconditional surrender to passing fashion.’ Irving Wohlfarth, ‘The Measure of the Possible, the Weight of the Real and the Heat of the Moment: Benjamin’s Actuality Today’, in Marcus and Nead (eds), *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, pp. 13-39 (17).
actuality, overtly ethical thinking may tend towards the abstraction of unsituated philosophy. Hence, in Benjamin’s work ethical ideas tend to dissolve into political activity. Furthermore, Benjamin’s work seems to claim that his particular actuality does not allow the luxury of expressly ethical behaviour; rather, it demands political commitment. In ‘The Storyteller’, he speaks of the righteous man who has disappeared from the world with the narrative community of storytelling: ‘The hierarchy of the creaturely world, which has its apex in the righteous man, reaches down into the abyss of the inanimate by many gradations’ (GS II 460; SW III 159). In a modern world whose landscape has been transformed by the forces of modernity, the righteous man has no place. Benjamin implies this at the end of ‘Theories of German Fascism’:

> Until Germany has exploded the entanglement of such Medusa-like beliefs that confront it in these essays, it cannot hope for a future. Perhaps the word ‘loosened’ would be better than ‘exploded,’ but this is not to say it should be done with kindly encouragement or with love, both of which are out of place here; nor should the way be smoothed for argumentation, for that wantonly persuasive rhetoric of debate. Instead, all the light that language and reason still afford should be focused upon that ‘primal experience’ [Urerlebnis] from whose barren gloom this mysticism of the death of the world crawls forth on its thousand unsightly conceptual feet. (GS III 249; SW II 320-21)

The emptiness of love and wise words are not sufficient here to the actual threat of fascism. It seems that we are a long way from Bakhtin and his imperative to love.

A closer examination, however, exhibits a different situation. Bakhtin’s form of ethics is also against a conception of love that is general. For Bakhtin, love must be specific and located. Any other form of love would similarly be empty and powerless. Bakhtin’s ethics, then, are concerned with actuality. Furthermore, Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’ contains an implicit ethical dimension that may usefully be compared with Bakhtin. Here, Benjamin argues that the task of the historical materialist is to fight on behalf of the vanquished of the past in a form of historiography that seeks to rescue the tradition of the oppressed. The historical materialist must not be indifferent to the past: ‘for it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that
does not recognize itself as intended in that image’ (*GS I* 695; *SW IV* 391). Rather the historical materialist participates with the past – not as something that is given, but as something that is still posited. Here, Benjamin contrasts the approach of the historical materialist with that of the historicist:

Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its procedure is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. When thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic cessation of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (*GS I* 702-03; *SW IV* 396)

The indifference of the historicist reproduces history as a sequence of equivalent and abstract units all of which add up to a closed conception of history as an inevitable progression towards a given present. The historical materialist who is not indifferent but stops to linger over the past preserves the specific nature of past moments and hence produces an open history of difference that preserves the posited nature of temporal experience. Time here is no longer homogeneous and empty, but filled with the bodily presence of subjects.

Similarly Bakhtin’s love is able to ‘slow down and linger intently over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute’ (*TPA* 64). In this way, Bakhtin’s loving attention transforms the nature of time:

Only the value of mortal man provides the standards for measuring the spatial and the temporal orders: space gains body as the possible horizon of mortal man and as his possible environment, and time possesses valutative weight and heaviness as the progression of mortal man’s life, where, moreover, the content of the temporal determination as well as its formal heaviness possess the validity of rhythmic progression. If man were not mortal, then the emotional-volitional tone of this progression of life – of this ‘earlier’, ‘later’, ‘as yet’, ‘when’, ‘never’ and the tone of the formal moments of rhythm would be quite different. If we annihilate the moment constituted by mortal man, the value of what is actually experienced will be extinguished: both the value of rhythm and the value of content. (*TPA* 65)
Without love, time is mathematically identical, homogenous and empty. With loving attention to the value of mortal man, time gains weight and space gains body. Bakhtin’s loving attention is also an activity that is directed towards history. Indifference ‘is the function of forgetting as well’ (*TPA* 64). The paradigm of love, for Bakhtin, seems to be loving remembrance of the dead. Benjamin demands the same ethics of memory. In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin comments:

> The corrective to this line of thought lies in the reflection that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [*eine Form des Eingedenkens*]. What science [*Wissenschaft*] has ‘determined’, remembrance can modify. Remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. (*GS V* 589; *AP* 471)

(Loving) remembrance, for both Bakhtin and Benjamin, is a weapon against a forgetful science that presents past suffering as given, necessary and hence repeatable. Remembrance attempts to complete happiness whilst not taking suffering for granted. In its emphasis on the necessity of remembrance, Benjamin’s notion of critical attentiveness and commitment (a term that is common to the vocabulary of both love and political struggle) comes to be the political corollary to Bakhtin’s ethical notion of love.\(^{107}\) Both point beyond the tragedy of culture.

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\(^{107}\) I am proposing here that the conjunction of Bakhtin and Benjamin might help us to discern a political ethics in Bakhtin and an ethical politics in Benjamin. The question of whether Bakhtin should be read as primarily an ethical thinker or a political thinker is contested. Bakhtin has certainly provided a rich source for the many thinkers of the recent ‘ethical turn’. In particular the comparison of Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas has been fruitful. See, for example, Michael J. Gardiner, ‘Alterity and Ethics: A Dialogical Perspective’, in *Theory Culture and Society*, 13, 1996, 2, pp. 121-43, and Jeffrey T. Nealon, ‘The Ethics of Dialogue: Bakhtin and Levinas’, in *College English*, 59, 1997, 2, pp. 129-48. Nevertheless, some scholars, notably American liberals, have displayed a tendency to focus on the ethical aspect of Bakhtin’s thought with the result that they depoliticize it entirely. Representative of this trend is Emerson’s comment: ‘It could be argued that the most enduring lesson Bakhtin offered his Soviet era was this: Do not conflate the ethical with the political […] for the time honoured reason that the ethical realm, if politicised, is prevented from functioning as an autonomous *check* on the political.’ Emerson, *The First Hundred Years*, p. 22. Brandist has argued powerfully against this collapsing of the political into the ethical in his work, particularly in Craig Brandist, ‘Ethics, Politics and the Potential of Dialogism’, in *Historical Materialism*, 5, 1999, 1, pp. 231-53. As indicated above, my position is to refuse a separation of the two spheres.
Chapter 3: Language

Language, the Tragedy of Culture and Intersubjectivity

In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin writes:

I think that language is much more adapted to giving utterance precisely to that truth [the *pravda* of responsible activity], and not to the abstract moment of the logical in its purity. That which is abstract, in its purity, is indeed unutterable: any expression is much too concrete for pure meaning – it distorts and dulls the purity and validity-in-itself of meaning. That is why in abstract thinking we never understand an expression in its full sense. *(TPA 34)*

Bakhtin’s point here is that language cannot be reduced to abstract, logical, or mathematical expression alone. The utterance always bears some of the traces of its genesis in a particular, historically and socially located context. The corollary of this is that attempts at stating only the logical purity of the given, utterances such as mathematical equations, are unutterable in language.¹ In ‘On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy’, Benjamin similarly argues that Kant’s inability to account for the fullness of possible experience is the result of his tendency to seek the model of knowledge not in language but in mathematical formulae. For both thinkers, language contains a fuller form of experience than the minimal experience that is grasped by abstract thinking.

Language, one might suggest, contains a double orientation: on the one hand, as a medium of communication between different subjects in different situations, language must contain an orientation towards abstraction, generality and repeatability. On the other hand, as the medium of expression for specifically located subjects and their evaluative positions and itself emerging from such positions and evaluations, it must contain an orientation towards the concrete and must be able to express the unrepeatability of actual being. Hence, language might be the site of participative action by virtue of this double orientation towards both the sphere of the given and the sphere of the posited. It might bear

¹ An intriguing point of comparison is provided by the Viennese Circle of logical positivists and their desire to reduce language and knowledge to a series of mathematical propositions. There is an interesting reversal here, in Bakhtin’s assertion that logical purity is unutterable, of Wittgenstein’s definition of silence and the utterable at the end of the *Tractatus*, a work which it is not clear whether Bakhtin could have known during this period. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* [1921], London, 1999, pp. 187-89.
the marks of a higher experience that the abstraction of mathematical formulae fails to grasp.

This seems to be the insight that is common to both Bakhtin in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and Benjamin in ‘On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy’. Nevertheless, at this early point, neither thinker has developed a conceptual vocabulary that articulates such an idea with any degree of clarity. During the course of the 1920s, however, Bakhtin, in association with other members of his circle, turns his attention increasingly towards the philosophy of language and develops a conceptual vocabulary that enables him to put language at the heart of his search for paths beyond the tragedy of culture. As a result, we can turn to another member of the Bakhtin Circle, Valentin Voloshinov and his text of 1929, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, where this conception of language is expressed in a more detailed and explicit fashion.

Voloshinov’s *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* represents a reformulation of Bakhtin’s concerns in *Toward the Philosophy of the Act*. Furthermore, it is characterized by the same structure. Where Bakhtin seeks a synthesis between Kantian theoreticism and *Lebensphilosophie*, Voloshinov, likewise, seeks a synthesis between opposing trends. In the first part of his study, Voloshinov describes the split between what he terms psychologists and anti-psychologists over the relationship between the psyche and ideology. Psychologists are individualistic subjectivists who maintain that ideology is the product of individual psychical activity. Psychologists, then, give precedence to the posited sphere of life. Anti-psychologists are abstract objectivists who

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2 In their periodization of Bakhtin’s work, Morson and Emerson see the period 1924-29 as the period in which Bakhtin shifts towards a more explicitly linguistically orientated philosophy. Morson and Emerson, *Bakhtin*, pp. 83-86. This is also the period in which, after the Bakhtin group’s move to Leningrad, Voloshinov studies with the linguist, Lev Iakubinskii. See Brandist, *The Bakhtin Circle*, pp. 9-11.

3 Matejka points out the dialectical structure of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and interprets it as Voloshinov’s attempt to be or at least to appear to be a good Marxist dialectician. Nevertheless, as noted above, one can observe an analogous dialectical approach in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* where Bakhtin is making no attempt to appear to be a Marxist. Ladislav Matejka, ‘On the First Prolegomena to Semiotics’, Appendix I, in *MPL*, pp. 161-74 (169).
maintain that the psyche is derived from ideology. They, then, give precedence to the given sphere of culture.

Voloshinov argues that the inability of thinkers to bring these two positions together represents Simmel's tragedy of culture in which the product of psychical activity (ideology, or, in Simmel's terms, objective culture) has become divorced from the psyche (or in Simmel's terms, life). Voloshinov, who observes admiringly that Simmel's analysis of the tragedy of culture 'contains no small number of acute and interesting observations', describes the basic deficiency of Simmel's conception:

For Simmel, an irreconcilable discrepancy exists between the psyche and ideology: he does not know the sign of a form of reality common to both psyche and ideology [...]. Moreover, though a sociologist, he utterly fails to appreciate the thoroughgoing social nature of the reality of ideology, as well as the reality of the psyche [...]. As a result the vital dialectical contradiction between the psyche and existence assumes for Simmel the shape of an inert, fixed antinomy by resorting to a metaphysically colored dynamics of the life process.

(MPL 40)

For Voloshinov, the underlying unity of meaningful existence is the social realm of ideological signification. Conceptions of the individual and the social are secondary abstractions from this fundamental unity and result in a fixed and tragic antinomy. As Voloshinov concludes on Simmel:

Only on the grounds of a materialistic monism can a dialectical resolution of all such contradictions be achieved. Any other grounds would necessarily entail either closing one's eyes to these

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4 This reversal of the liberal, Anglo-American account of the relationship between individual and society where individuals come together and constitute society aligns Voloshinov with the broad tradition of French Structuralism from Durkheim to Lacan, Althusser and Foucault. According to this tradition, 'collective representations' (Durkheim), 'langue' (Lacan), 'ideology' (Althusser) and 'discourse' (Foucault) are the fundamental social unities out of which the individual constructs her- or himself. In particular, the parallels with Lacan have been used by Bakhtin scholars as a means to present Bakhtin and the Bakhtin circle as ethical proto-deconstructionists. See, for example, William Handley, 'The Ethics of Subject Creation in Bakhtin and Lacan', in Shepherd (ed.), *Bakhtin, Carnival and Other Subjects*, pp. 144-62. Williams seizes on Voloshinov's prioritizing of the collective over the individual in order to support his notion of the collective nature of 'structures of feeling' in Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, pp. 35-43. For a critique of this on the grounds of Williams's misreading of Voloshinov's notion of consciousness, with reference to Althusser and Lacan, see Antony Easthope, 'The Bakhtin School and Raymond Williams: Subject and Signifier', in Shepherd (ed.), *Bakhtin, Carnival and Other Subjects*, pp. 115-24.
contradictions or transforming them into a hopeless antinomy, a tragic dead end. (MPL 40)

One must not be put off by the rather dourly Marxist-sounding term ‘materialistic monism’. This monism is the plural and concrete sphere of intersubjective interaction to be found in social communication. Simmel’s anxiety at the tragedy of culture, according to Voloshinov, is no more than the anxiety that results from the bourgeois attitude that is unable to see the social significance of all phenomena, including the individual psyche, and that instead wishes to see the individual as the fundamental building block.

Like Bakhtin, Voloshinov’s answer to Simmel and the tragedy of culture is to be found in the intersubjective aspect of experience. Unlike Bakhtin, however, Voloshinov’s linguistic approach gives him a set of terms with which to describe this form of intersubjectivity, the essence of which he finds in language. Marxism and the Philosophy of Language describes two trends in linguistic thought that correspond to the psychologists and the anti-psychologists: the individualistic subjectivism of the Vossler school and others and the abstract objectivism of Saussure and the Geneva school. These two trends can likewise be mapped onto the opposition between the posited and the given respectively.5 Drawing on Wilhelm von Humboldt and the distinction he draws between ergon and energeia, Voloshinov notes that individualistic subjectivism, on the one hand, conceives of language as the expression of the subject (energeia), that is to say, language as concrete, posited activity. Abstract objectivism, on the other hand, conceives of language as an inert objective system (ergon), that is to say, language as abstract, given product.6

5 See MPL, pp. 45-63. Voloshinov’s reading of Saussure is polemical and produces an image of his thought that is reduced to the abstracting gesture that distinguishes between langue and parole. Thibault argues against the understanding of the opposition of langue and parole as an inert binary in Paul J. Thibault, Re-reading Saussure: The Dynamics of Signs in Social Life, London, 1997. He demonstrates some of the reductionist character of Voloshinov’s reading of Saussure, particularly the doctrine of the arbitrary nature of the sign, pp. 251-54.

6 Humboldt holds that the primary and original aspect of language was energeia, activity. As languages develop and stabilize, however, linguistic forms accrue to language and it takes on the aspect of ergon, an inert product. Humboldt describes the individual speaker and the relationship of energeia to ergon as follows: ‘in the influence exerted on him lies the regularity of language and its forms; in his own reaction, a principle of freedom’. Alexander von Humboldt, On Language: The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental
Voloshinov characterizes these trends by means of an analysis of their differing preferences for what he terms ‘meaning’ and ‘theme’. Meaning, on the one hand, the focus of abstract objectivism, consists in ‘signification without regard to the concrete situation of utterance in life. It is those aspects of the signification of an utterance that are most abstract and general, reproducible and self-identical in all instances of repetition’ (*MPL* 100). It is the word of dictionaries and grammar that, abstracting from lived speech, aims at the inert stability and repeatability of signification. Theme, the focus of individualistic subjectivism, on the other hand, is the expression of the concrete temporal situatedness of the utterance in the mouth of a speaking subject in the midst of life: ‘The theme of an utterance is concrete – as concrete as the historical instant to which the theme belongs’ (*MPL* 100). Theme is the subject’s expression of concrete relations to and evaluations of the temporal, spatial and social environment. This split between a focus on theme and a focus on meaning constitutes an articulation of the tragedy of culture.

Voloshinov’s insight is that both theme and meaning are contained in the primary unity of language as social and inter-subjective activity. The bifurcation of language into the individual aspect of theme and the objective aspect of meaning results from a failure to recognize this fundamental unity. Voloshinov, and subsequently Bakhtin, view language as, in essence, inter-subjective:

Any true understanding is dialogic in nature. Understanding strives to match the speaker’s word with a counter word [...]. There is no reason for saying that meaning belongs to a word as such. In essence, meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding. Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the effect of interaction between the speaker and listener produced via the material of a particular sound complex. (*MPL* 103)

*Development of Mankind* (1836), trans. by Peter Heath, Cambridge, 1989, p. 37. Humboldt notes the tendency of languages to develop in terms of the complexity of grammatical forms with the result that the quality of language as *ergon* comes to predominate over *energeia*. Whilst Humboldt noted that this could lead to degeneracy of a linguistic culture, he also saw this in terms of a narrative of progress whereby a language develops from the poetry-dominated state of primitive cultures to the prose-dominated state of culture capable of philosophical discourse. These ideas are pertinent not only to Voloshinov but also to Bakhtin’s theory of the novel.
The primary focus of the Bakhtin Circle’s philosophy of language is neither the individual utterance nor the system of language but rather the interaction of utterances, the utterance in reaction to, with reference to, or in pre-emption of another’s utterance: (free) indirect discourse (Voloshinov), the word with a sideways glance, the internally dialogized word (Bakhtin).

In a sense that seems at first glance paradoxical, the word of the other must always precede the word of the self. Deleuze and Guattari, drawing on Voloshinov, make explicit something of the strange nature of this situation:

Language in its entirety is indirect discourse. Indirect discourse in no way supposes direct discourse; rather, the latter is extracted from the former, to the extent that the operations of significance and proceedings of subjectification in an assemblage are distributed, attributed, and assigned, or that the variables of the assemblage enter into constant relations, however temporarily. Direct discourse is a detached fragment of a mass and is born of the dismemberment of the collective assemblage; but the collective assemblage is always like the murmur from which I take my proper name, the constellation of voices, concordant or not, from which I draw my voice […]. My direct discourse is still the free indirect discourse running through me, coming from other worlds or other planets.7

Just as we have seen that, for Voloshinov, the individual psyche is constituted secondarily out of the ideological material of social life, so it follows that the individual word, conceived of in isolation is a secondary abstraction from the essence of language which is to be found in the other’s word. This theory allows Voloshinov and Bakhtin to replace a primary division between subject and object with a primary unity of intersubjectivity in language, from which subject and object are falsely abstracted. We now see, then, the reason for the significance that Bakhtin, and, I shall argue, Benjamin ascribe to language. Language becomes the medium in which the fundamental schism opened up in Western

philosophy since Descartes, the schism between cognizing subject and cognized object-world, is revealed as already healed. As Williams comments of Voloshinov's conception of language: 'It is of and to this experience – the lost middle term between the abstract entities, “subject” and “object”, on which the propositions of idealism and orthodox materialism are erected – that language speaks.'

For Voloshinov, indirect discourse is the phenomenon in which the true nature of language is to be observed:

As we know now, the real unit of language that is implemented in speech (Sprache als Rede) is not the individual, isolated monologic utterance, but the interaction of at least two utterances – in a word dialogue. The productive study of dialogue presupposes, however, a more profound investigation of the forms used in reported speech, since these forms reflect basic and constant tendencies in the active reception of other speakers' speech [...]. What we have in the forms of reported speech is precisely an objective documentation of this reception. (MPL 117)

Bakhtin, in his study of the novel, in particular, seeks to isolate the artistic use of linguistic forms in which the essentially intersubjective, dialogic nature of all language is preserved and allowed to flourish, rather than being reduced to the monologic word which renders mute the word of the other that resides in the word of the self – hence reproducing the fixed antinomies of subject and object. In his note of 1970–71, however, Bakhtin makes an intriguing comment that suggests that an understanding of language as the lost middle term between the antinomies of subject and object can be gained in other ways as well:

Quests for my own word are in fact quests for a word that is not my own, a word that is more than myself; this is a striving to depart from one's own words, with which nothing essential can be said. [...] This is now the most critical problem of contemporary literature, which leads many to reject the genre of the novel altogether, to replace it with a montage of documents, to bookishness [lettrism], and, to a certain degree, also to the literature of the absurd. In some sense [...] these [quests] can be defined as various forms of silence. These quests led Dostoevsky to the creation of the polyphonic novel. He could not find the word for the monologic novel. A parallel path led Leo Tolstoy to folk stories (primitivism), to the introduction of

 Williams, Marxism and Literature, p. 37.
biblical quotations (in the final parts of his novels). Another route would be to cause the world to begin speaking and to listen to the word of the world itself (Heidegger) \((SG\ 149)\)

Dostoevsky’s quest for his own word in the word that was not his own, his desire to reproduce and honour the intersubjective nature of language and, indeed, existence \textit{per se}, led him to the complex forms of the polyphonic novel. Benjamin, as we shall see, is largely concerned with the other possible paths that Bakhtin identifies. In what follows I shall examine the ways in which Benjamin’s theory of language may be seen to approximate Bakhtin’s philosophy of language in these other paths: the word of the world, quotation, montage, and silence.

Jay, in his article ‘Experience without a Subject’, suggests that Benjamin’s search for higher experience ‘without a subject’ in language might have, but did not, lead him to a theory of indirect discourse such as that of Voloshinov and Bakhtin.\(^9\) Jay traces the development of the concept of indirect discourse and its variants from Lorck’s \textit{erlebte Rede} through Voloshinov to Benveniste’s similar concept of the ‘middle voice’.\(^10\) He argues that in both indirect discourse and the middle voice Benjamin’s longed-for sphere of neutrality towards both subject and object can be achieved, quoting Derrida to the effect that ‘the middle voice, a certain nontransitivity, may be what philosophy, at its outset, distributed into an active and a passive voice, thereby constituting itself out of this repression’.\(^11\) Furthermore, Jay notes the importance of Voloshinov’s dialogical and intersubjective understanding of this sphere of ‘experience without a subject’. For Jay, the notion of the middle voice in which subject and object are subsumed in undifferentiated unity carries a certain threat and ‘may even prove an unwitting hand-maiden of an authoritarian politics, as Heidegger’s philosophy itself based on a search for experience without a subject, unfortunately did’.\(^12\)

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\(^9\) Jay, ‘Experience without a Subject’.


\(^12\) Jay, ‘Experience without a Subject’, p. 205.
sees the more open space of Bakhtin and Voloshinov's indirect discourse as 'a less settled notion of a unity prior to a split into direct and indirect discourse, active and passive voice' where 'experience without the subject turns out to be experience with more than one subject inhabiting the same space'.

According to Jay, the question of indirect discourse is something that Benjamin happens not to notice. Benjamin 'failed to appreciate' the confirmation of his conception of absolute experience by the linguistic evidence of indirect discourse in the novel. The contention of what follows is first, that Benjamin does have an approach to the notion of intersubjective, indirect discourse – even if he never calls it this by name; and second, that Benjamin even displays this in his reading of the modern novel. As well as looking at the extent to which Bakhtinian ideas of indirect discourse can shed light on Benjamin, however, this chapter will also try and show how Benjaminian ideas such as quotation, montage and mutism can shed light on Bakhtin.

'The Word of the World' and Translation

In order to understand Benjamin's philosophy of language and its affinities with Bakhtin, we have to move a long way from Voloshinov and his Marxist and semiotic vocabulary. For the primary engagement of the young Benjamin's theory of language is with the very different world of German Romanticism. Nevertheless, Benjamin shares the same concerns as Voloshinov: the desire to transcend the fixed antinomies of subject and object by coming to an understanding of the nature of language.

As we have seen, Benjamin's criticism of Kant's theory of experience is, to a large extent, directed at Kant's inability to conceive of the world other than in terms of the division between cognizing subject and cognized object. In this, Benjamin echoes the concerns of the German thinkers following Kant (Schiller, Fichte, Schlegel, Schelling, Novalis, Hölderlin, Hegel) who likewise realized that the world as represented by Kant is split by a set of dualisms – reason and nature,

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13 Jay, 'Experience without a Subject', p. 205.
14 Jay, 'Experience without a Subject', p. 206.
duty and inclination, freedom and necessity, and so forth — that stem from the fundamental dualism of subject and object. In particular, Benjamin has great affinities with Hölderlin, hence, for example, his 1914 essay, ‘Two Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin’.

In a fragmentary text of 1795, Hölderlin addresses the question of subject and object. His text is a dialogue not so much with Kant directly, but rather with Fichte, who, in the Wissenschaftslehre (1794), had proposed that Kantian dualism can be overcome by positing an absolute ego in which, through reflection, both subject and object are contained. Hölderlin maintains, contra Fichte, that no sort of ‘I’, absolute or not, can precede a division between subject and object, since, in so far as it is capable of judging, it must always be defined in relation to an object that is distinct from it. He makes this point with a piece of word-play:

Judgement — is in the highest and most strict sense the original separation, that separation which makes object and subject first possible, the judgement [Ur - theilung, original - separation]. The concept of judgement already contains the concept of the reciprocal relation of object and subject to each other, as well as the necessary precondition of a whole of which object and subject are the parts.

On the verso of the scrap of paper on which this fragment appears, Hölderlin addresses, in distinction to judgement, the question of Being. Being is the standpoint of unity of subject and object that precedes the judging I:

Where subject and object simply are, and not just partially, united, such that no separation can take place without injuring the nature of that which is to be divided, only there and nowhere else can there be talk of being as such, the same is the case in intellectual intuition.

Subjectivity, for Hölderlin, is a breaking up of this underlying unity of ‘absolute Being’ as opposed to the ‘absolute I’. Absolute being, however, is necessarily unknowable. As Hölderlin writes to Schiller a few months later: ‘the unity of subject and object is possible aesthetically, but, in the intellectual way of seeing things [in der intellectualen Anschauung] of theory, possible only through infinite

15 See Fichte, The Science of Knowledge.
approximation [\textit{unendliche Annäherung}].\footnote{18} Aesthetically, however, such a unity may be more approachable.

Increasingly, Hölderlin abandons philosophy for poetry and, by giving voice to nature, attempts in his verse to reconstitute the broken ground of being. For here, in poetic inspiration, when the subject is ‘alone and less conscious of himself [...]’ what is speechless gains speech by him and through him, and what is general and unconscious achieves the form of particularity and consciousness’.\footnote{19} When he is ‘less conscious of himself’, the subject nature of the poet begins to recede. Accordingly, the object nature of the natural world also falls away. Nature finds voice as a subject. We approach a mode of neutrality vis-à-vis subject and object, exactly the situation which Benjamin describes as necessary for higher experience in ‘On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy’. This must be an ‘absolute’, non-subjective experience:

\begin{quote}
All genuine experience rests upon the pure ‘epistemological (transcendental) consciousness’, if this term is still usable under the condition that it be stripped of everything subjective. [...] The task of future epistemology is to find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of subject and object; in other words, it is to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities. (\textit{GS II} 163; \textit{SW I} 104)
\end{quote}

This sphere of neutrality is what is achieved by the poet who, as Bakhtin puts it above (with reference to Heidegger), causes ‘the world to begin speaking’ and listens ‘to the word of the world itself’.\footnote{20}

In Hölderlin’s conception, the poet must receive and transmit the speech of nature. Thus, subject and object are reunited in language.\(^{21}\) We can now see how Hölderlin can be brought alongside Bakhtin. Despite the vast difference in approach, despite his resolute emphasis on the ‘holy’ sphere of poetry not the ‘profane’ sphere of prose, Hölderlin’s aesthetics are, at base, comparable with Bakhtin’s insistence on the importance of indirect discourse in the novel: at the heart of both there is a search for the other’s word as the ground of a wholeness of being that does not know of the antinomies of subject and object. Benjamin’s early thinking on language is exceedingly close to Hölderlin’s. Whilst Hölderlin’s thinking on being and language bears certain broad similarities to Bakhtin’s own approach, in Benjamin’s adaptation of it even greater affinities become apparent.

We see the outlines of Benjamin’s theory of language in his essay of 1916, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’. This essay is dauntingly theological, if not straightforwardly mystical. As well as drawing on his study of Hölderlin, the essay represents a creative synthesis of the long tradition of language mysticism and ontologies of linguistic being that stretches from Boehme to Hamann and Schlegel.\(^{22}\) It seems curious that a few years after Saussure has given his ground-breaking lectures in general linguistics in Geneva, establishing a radically modern linguistics, and at the same time as the Vienna Circle is developing its mathematically orientated philosophy of language, Benjamin is delving back into what seems to be mediaeval obscurantism in order to construct a mystical theory of language.\(^{23}\)

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\(^{21}\) Larmore points out the extent, however, that poetry is not omnipotent in this respect and is restricted in its temporal dimension: ‘Strain as it may against the division between subject and object, poetry remains an act of reflection. The poet must step back from whatever inklings he has of the unity of being in order to put it into words. For Hölderlin, the moments of vision are therefore never in the present. They are always past or future, remembered or anticipated.’ Charles Larmore, ‘Hölderlin and Novalis’, in Karl Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 141-60 (152). This temporal restriction of true experience is echoed throughout Benjamin’s work, as shall become clear in the final chapter.

\(^{22}\) For a detailed study of Benjamin’s relationship to the German tradition of language mysticism and Hamann in particular, see Menninghaus, *Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, pp. 9-50.

\(^{23}\) As Münster comments: ‘At the moment when logical positivism starts out during the 1920s, this essay of Benjamin’s might be considered to be the very last expression of the philosophical
How does this affect our reading of the essay? One does not have to accept or reject the essay in toto on the basis of an acceptance or a rejection of mysticism. The essay contains fundamental insights into the relationship between Man, nature and language that can be understood in secular terms. Benjamin's language-mysticism can, in part, be explained by his inability to present his underlying intuition of the nature of language in any other way. For all the importance that he accords to language in his thinking, Benjamin does not engage thoroughly with theoretical linguistics. One need only read his 1935 review article, 'Problems in the Sociology of Language: An Overview', which deals with, amongst others, Bühler, Bally, Vygotsky, Piaget, and Marr and hence provides a point of contact with the world of the Bakhtin Circle, to see Benjamin's inability to deal with what was then the cutting edge of linguistics without the intrusion of his own agenda to the detriment of the coherence of the subject that he discusses. Pensky suggests that Benjamin simply lacks a linguist's conceptual vocabulary, and that this might be an additional explanation for his recourse to mysticism.

idealism of language of the 18th and 19th centuries.' Münster, Progrès et catastrophe, p. 124. Münster also discusses Benjamin's reading of Carnap and attempts to construct a possible dialogue of Benjamin with the Vienna Circle, pp. 139-41. Pensky and Menninghaus make similar points. Pensky, Melancholy Dialectics, pp. 47-48; Menninghaus, Benjamin's Theorie der Sprachmagie, p. 16. Benjamin himself also implies as much: 'If in what follows the nature of language is considered on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis, the object is neither biblical interpretation, nor subjection of the Bible to objective consideration as revealed truth, but the discovery of what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language; and the Bible is only initially indispensable for this purpose because the present argument follows it in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical' (GS II 147; SW I 67). The Bible is essential to Benjamin because only through its myth of origin is language explicable as the 'ultimate reality'.

Pressler, whose study consists of a close reading and contextualization of Benjamin's review-article, is forced, time and time again, to acknowledge Benjamin's wilful misreading of his material. For example, on Bühler: 'Benjamin does not show the least inclination to deal with the rich empirical proofs for Bühler's axioms nor to work through the axioms themselves.' Günter Karl Pressler, Vom mimetischen Ursprung der Sprache: Walter Benjamin's Sammelreferat 'Probleme der Sprachsoziologie' im Kontext seiner Sprachtheorie, Frankfurt/Main, 1992, p. 34. Pensky, Melancholy Dialectics, p. 56.
The position of Bakhtin and Voloshinov is different. They live in an environment in which linguistics is, arguably, the model discipline for the humanities. Here, a strong domestic linguistic tradition fuses with the new linguistics from Geneva; Soviet thinkers are well-informed about the most recent developments in the French- and German-speaking world. As a result, Bakhtin and Voloshinov possess a set of linguistic terms and concepts that Benjamin does not. A reader with an awareness of the linguistic concepts and terminology found in Bakhtin and Voloshinov can reassess Benjamin's theory of language.

A central matter in this context lies in the fact that Benjamin repeatedly speaks of Man's relation to nature, whereas Bakhtin repeatedly speaks of the relation of one subject to another. This appears to constitute a fundamental difference between the two thinkers. Rochlitz argues that 'Benjamin discovers intersubjectivity, which has very little place in his thinking, only through the detour of the mystical or poetic relation to nature.' In this chapter I disagree with Rochlitz and contend that Benjamin's thinking has a form of intersubjectivity at its very heart. Nevertheless, Benjamin's immersion in the German Romantic

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27 Nevertheless, in his notes from 1970-71, Bakhtin has recourse to a nature mysticism that is not dissimilar to Benjamin's thinking, speculating that 'when consciousness appeared in the world (existence) and, perhaps, when biological life appeared (perhaps not only animals, but trees and grass also witness and judge) the world (existence) changed radically (SG 137). This and the notes in the same passage on the 'witness and judge' and the emergence of what Bakhtin terms the 'supraexistence' are intriguing for a comparison with Benjamin, but the context is perhaps too fragmentary to allow much comment. Morson and Emerson interpret this passage as Bakhtin's development of a Stoical conception of freedom. Morson and Emerson, *Bakhtin*, p. 453.


29 A comparison with Voloshinov's work, which engages in thorough and well-informed detail with material similar to the material of Benjamin's article, makes this clear. Nevertheless, Alpatov raises doubts over Bakhtin and Voloshinov's credentials in his examination of the early notes for *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. (Alpatov views Bakhtin and Voloshinov as co-authors.) See Alpatov, 'The Bakhtin Circle and Problems in Linguistics', pp 75-83.

30 In the remainder of this chapter I shall follow Benjamin's (biblical) diction in using the term 'Man' to speak of humanity in general.

tradition, on the one hand, and his lack of linguistic expertise, on the other hand, result in his being able to come close to a theory of intersubjectivity only through the detour of Man’s relation to nature. It is precisely at this limit of Benjamin’s approach that a comparison with the thought of Bakhtin is so valuable.

In ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, Benjamin argues that since God created the world through the word, so he necessarily implanted language within things. Nature is possessed of its own linguistic being which is the residue of the Word of God. Man, however, was created differently. Benjamin points out that God created man out of earth: ‘God did not create man from the word, and he did not name him. He did not wish to subject man to language, but in man God set language which had served Him as medium of creation, free’ (GS II 149; SW I 68). Language, originating in God, is present first in nature and not, as such, in Man. God gives Man the capacity of language, but he does not give Man language itself which is to be found instead in nature. Man finds language already inhabited. As Bakhtin comments in the Dostoevsky book:

> When a member of a collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by others. No, he receives the word from another’s voice and filled with that other’s voice. [...] His own thought finds the word already inhabited. (DP 202)

In Bakhtin’s theory, the word is already inhabited by the subjectivity of the other. So it is with Benjamin. Nature has its own share of subjectivity in so far as it is possessed of language. Man, too, however, possesses a share of subjectivity, albeit a different form of subjectivity granted by the freedom of the faculty for language.

For Benjamin, unlike Rousseau, Eden is not characterized by an unmediated relationship between Man and nature; Man is not nature, but is already, by virtue of his language-faculty, separate from it. Nor does Benjamin’s

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32 Bröcker gives a parallel explanation for nature’s subjectivity which relies on the fusion of creation and naming which is inherent in the creation of things through the word: ‘because God did not first create mere matter which he then called something, but rather expressed the things [of creation] in the word, the cognition of these things cannot be reduced to subject-object relations’. Michael Bröcker, ‘Sprache’, in Opitz and Wizisla (eds), Benjamins Begriffe, pp. 740-73 (745).
image, despite an outward similarity, tally with the medieval philosophy of the
‘book of the world’, as described by Foucault:

In its original form, as it was given to men by God, language was a
sign of things that was absolutely certain and transparent because it
resembled them. Names were imprinted on the things that they
designated, just as strength is inscribed on the body of the lion and
royalty is inscribed in the gaze of the eagle.3

Man does not possess the absolute lordship of subject over object that would be
contained in a ready-made, God-given language. His lordship resides merely in
the capacity to respond to the language that already inheres nature.

Man’s relation to the sphere of nature is, as a result, the relation of one sort
of subject to a subject of another sort. As Bröcker comments: ‘The language of
man is bound to the object-world but man does stand in a subject-relation to it [the
world]. [...] In the paradisiac state of creation, subject and object do not face each
other as alien.’34 The relation between Man and nature is, then, analogous to a
relation of intersubjectivity. This notion of intersubjectivity is a departure from
Hölderlin’s poetic absolute. In Hölderlin’s theory, the boundaries of subject and
object are abolished in a moment of undifferentiated unity of being, whereas, in
Benjamin’s image, relations persist as relations between subjects without
objects.35

Benjamin makes clear his objections to a philosophy of language based on
the relation between a subject and an object-world, in his criticisms of what he
terms the ‘bourgeois conception of language’:

Anyone who believes that man communicates his mental being by
names cannot also assume that it is his mental being that he
communicates, for this does not happen through the names of things,
that is, through the words by which he denotes a thing. And, equally,

35 My argument here, then, differs from that of Thornhill who contends that ‘influenced by both
Klages and Cassirer, Benjamin conceives the initial period of history as a state of
undifferentiation, a state of unruptured mimesis in which no distinction is made between subject
and object. This is for Benjamin the state of Erfahrung, continuous ontological experience, a form
of experience which is replaced by the sporadic, fractured Erlebnis of modern existence.’
Christopher Thornhill, Walter Benjamin and Karl Kraus: Problems of a Wahlverwandschaft,
the advocate of such a view can only assume that man is communicating factual subject matter to other men, for that does happen through the word by which he denotes a thing. This view is the bourgeois conception of language, the invalidity and emptiness of which will become increasingly clear in what follows. It holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, its addressee a human being. (GS II 143-44; SW I 64-65)

Language is not an instrument. In essence, for Benjamin, ‘all language communicates itself’ and only secondarily any particular content. As Rochlitz has pointed out, Benjamin’s resistance to the instrumentalization of language shows his affinities with the Symbolist thinking of Stefan George and Stéphane Mallarmé. Yet, in so far as a non-instrumental conception of language does not reduce the world to an object, it is clear that the effect of Benjamin’s conception of language also relates to his criticism of Kant’s concept of experience: As Käther comments:

Language is the medium of unity that transcends the duality of subject and object, the medium that contains within it the structural potential for unlimited knowledge and that gives the capacity of communication to the material world as object. Through the expansion of the concept of language to include all areas of being, an expansion of [Kant’s] concept of experience [Erfahrung] is achieved in respect of perceptions of and dealings with the sensuous world.

This then is Benjamin’s ‘higher experience’. Language is the intersubjective unity - understood as a plural rather than an undifferentiated phenomenon – that precedes the tragic antinomies of the division into subject and object. We may recall here Jay’s comments, referred to above, on Bakhtin’s notion of indirect discourse as ‘a less settled notion of a unity prior to the split into direct and indirect discourse, active and passive voice’ where ‘experience without the

36 Rochlitz, The Disenchantment of Art, p. 12. The ‘aesthetic aristocratism’ of George and Mallarmé helps us understand Benjamin’s use of the term, ‘bourgeois’, which has, as yet, nothing to do with Marxism. McCole discusses the ambivalent attitude of Benjamin to George in McCole, Benjamin, pp. 79-80. As I show in the next chapter, Benjamin criticizes what he terms George’s Sprachkultus (cult of language) in his essay on Kraus (GS II 359). Bröcker also points out the influence of Wyneken’s youth movement and its anti-modern stance on Benjamin’s ‘anti-bourgeois’ conception of language: ‘The concept of the “divine”, the “absolute” which is free from empirical aims and motivations and which stands in opposition to the notion of language as a system of instrumentally oriented signs, points back to the intellectual milieu of the Youth movement which must be understood not only as a limited reaction to the crisis of the Gymnasium and the University but also as a resistance to the modernization of German society.’ Bröcker, ‘Sprache’, p. 742.

subject turns out to be experience with more than one subject inhabiting the same space’.\(^{38}\)

Benjamin’s theory of the internally differentiated unity of Man and nature is grounded in a theory of translation.\(^{39}\) Man is not given language, merely the capacity of language. Hence, in expressing his own essence as the one with the capacity for language, he must orientate himself outside himself towards the language that is immanent in nature as the residue of God’s creative word. He does this by translating the mute language of things into his own language in the process of naming:

> In name the word of God has not remained creative; it has become in one part receptive, even if receptive to language. Thus fertilized, it aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth. \((\text{GS II 150; SW I 69})\)

Man’s search for his own word is a search for the word of the other, albeit in a rather different sense from that of Bakhtin. Nevertheless, this form of translation is analogous to indirect discourse. It must be double-voiced, fulfilling the same role as indirect discourse in Bakhtin and Voloshinov: it must preserve the subject nature of the other, giving birth to the language of nature rather than reducing it to an object.

Benjamin, like Bakhtin and Voloshinov, raises a secondary activity, translation, to the status of a primary activity. As Fenves suggests in his comment on this essay, this means that ‘the original [...] is derivative at the origin’.\(^{40}\)

Translation becomes the foundation for all language: ‘Translation attains its full

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\(^{38}\) Jay, ‘Experience without a Subject’, p. 205.

\(^{39}\) Benjamin draws here on Hamann in whose ‘Aesthetica in nuce’ we read: ‘Speak, that I may see Thee! This wish was answered by the Creation, which is an utterance to created things through created things... [...] The fault may lie where it will (outside us or within us): all we have left in nature is fragmentary verse and disjecta membra poetae. To collect these together is the scholar’s modest part; the philosopher’s to interpret them; to imitate them, or – bolder still – to adapt them, the poet’s. To speak is to translate – from the tongue of angels into the tongue of men, that is to translate thoughts into words – things into names – images into signs.’ J. G. Hamann, ‘Aesthetica in nuce: A Rhapsody in Cabbalistic Prose’, in Bernstein (ed.), Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics, pp. 1-23 (4).

meaning in the realization that every evolved language [...] can be considered as a translation of all the others' (GS II 151; SW I 69-70). At first sight paradoxically, translation, which is 'much too far-reaching and powerful to be treated in any way as an afterthought, as has happened occasionally' (GS II 151; SW I 69) becomes the primary means whereby the subject finds his own words, and hence comes to a subjectivity that does not sacrifice the subjectivity of the other.

Benjamin develops his theory of translation in his 1924 essay, 'The Task of the Translator'. This essay opposes a number of commonly received ideas about translation. It opens by stating that no art-work is intended for the recipient and no translation is intended for a reader who does not understand the language of the original. This contradicts Benjamin’s position elsewhere, particularly in the 'The Work of Art', on the role of the recipient of the art-work. But Benjamin’s intention here is different: the idea that translation does not serve a reader reinforces Benjamin’s insistence on the non-instrumental nature of language: ‘Any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information – here, something inessential. This is the hallmark of a bad translation’ (GS IV 9; SW I 253). A translation is not a tool by means of which the reader gains mastery over the object that is contained in the original.

Benjamin counters two standard views of translation: the first, the theory of the translator’s licence, holds that a translation should be as free as possible in order to preserve the meaning of the idea that the original expresses; the second, the theory of the translator’s fidelity, holds that the translation should be as literal as possible in order to preserve the original itself. The problem of the first is that it assumes that the meaning of the original is not present in its language and hence reduces meaning to information. The problem of the second is that, as Tackels puts it, ‘by translating word for word the idioms and structures of the original the translator inevitably reinforces the thesis according to which a translation is an

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41 Rochlitz points out the extent to which Benjamin draws on modern creeds of l’art pour l’art, quoting Diderot: ‘If in drawing a picture, one imagines a beholder, all is lost.’ Rochlitz, The Disenchantment of Art, p. 23.
imitation, a copy'.\textsuperscript{42} In both instances, translation attempts mere reproduction of a fixed and inert object, whether this be some absolute meaning conceived of as lying beyond the text, or the corporeal matter of the original language itself. Again, we see Benjamin's objection to processes of reproduction that result in, or aim at, the repetition of inert identity.

Instead, translation is, as I have already argued, a form of indirect or double-voiced discourse:

The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original. This is a feature of translation that basically differentiates it from the poet's work, because the intention of the latter is never toward the language as such, at its totality, but is aimed solely at specific linguistic contextual aspects. Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one. (\textit{GS IV} 16; \textit{SW I} 258-59)

Translation aims to allow the original language to reverberate and echo in its own language. Unlike the language of original poetry which is focused on specific contexts, translation is focused on another's language. It is a word that looks at a referential context, but by means of a 'sideways glance' at the language of another, a search for the other's word. In notes for a broadcast that Benjamin planned in the mid-1930s, 'Translation – For and Against' (1935 or 1936), Benjamin makes this point again: 'Stresemann's dictum (intended as \textit{a bon mot}) that "French is spoken in every language" is more serious than he thought, for the ultimate purpose of translation is to represent [\textit{repräsentieren}] the foreign language in one's own' (\textit{GS VI} 159-60; \textit{SW III} 251).

In the image of the language forest above, it is possible to see affinities with Bakhtin's distinction between poetry and dialogized discourse in 'Discourse in the Novel':

The trajectory of the poetic word toward its object and toward the unity of language is a path along which the poetic word is continually

encountering someone else's word, and each takes new bearing from the other; the records of the passage remain in the slag of the creative process (as scaffolding is cleared away once construction is finished) so that the finished work may rise as unitary speech, one co-extensive with its object, as if it were speech about an 'Edenic' world. (DI 331)

The poet, according to Bakhtin, must studiously ignore and clear away the traces of the social complexity of intersecting voices in his language in order to find his own voice which is stripped of all intentions but his own. This is possible, in the terms of Benjamin's image, from within the depths of the language forest. In these depths, poetry, according to Bakhtin, cultivates wilful ignorance of a language other than its own:

Poetry behaves as if it lived in the heartland of its language territory and does not approach too closely the borders of this language, where it would inevitably be brought into dialogic contact with heteroglossia; poetry chooses not to look beyond the boundaries of its own language. (DI 399)

Poetic language attempts to ignore the existence of other languages. Ignoring the existence of other languages is not possible for the translator who stands outside the language of the text that he translates. His 'outsidedness' – to use a term of Bakhtin – means that he must direct his own language at the language of the other, at the language forest itself.

Translation is, for Benjamin, an interaction between two languages which revives both the language into which the text is translated but also the language from which it is translated:

While a poet's words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually be absorbed by its renewal. Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own. (GS IV 13; SW I 256)

In translation, historical sterility, deadness, and even the monumentality of 'endurance' are rejected in favour of a historicized, nascent, growing and maturing sense of language as alive and new. Translation is also (returning to the themes of the first chapter) a means of keeping tradition alive as the production of
difference rather than the tradition of inert objects that remain the same. Like the critic whose task it is to release the meaning of the cultural object for the present that is concealed within it, the task of the translator is a task of liberation: 'It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among foreign tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of the work' (GS IV 19; SW I 261).

We see here the extent to which Benjamin's notion of the effect and role of translation is not so far removed from Bakhtin's notion of the power and effect of heteroglossia. There are clearly substantial differences between Bakhtin's heteroglossia and Benjamin's translation. In his essay, Benjamin is describing what he thinks good translation is and how translations should be. In his work on heteroglossia, Bakhtin purports to describe an historical and social phenomenon that manifests itself in language. Nevertheless, both ideas express Bakhtin's and Benjamin's views on what language is, in its essence, as well as what it should be. In heteroglossia:

The new cultural and creative consciousness lives in an actively polyglot world. [...] Languages throw light on each other: one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of other languages. [...] All this set into motion a process of active, mutual cause-and-effect and inter-illumination. Words and language began to have a different feel to them; objectively they ceased to be what they had once been. Under these conditions of external and internal inter-illumination, each given language - even if its linguistic composition (phonetics, vocabulary, morphology, etc.) were to remain absolutely unchanged - is, as it were, reborn, becoming qualitatively a different thing for the consciousness that creates in it (DI 12)

Similarly, the interaction of language in translation is the guarantee of newness and creativity as opposed to the sterility of the language that stands alone and does not look out of the darkness of its solitary language-forest.

Towards the end of the essay on translation, Benjamin produces a quotation from Pannwitz:

43 See my comments above on the tension between description and prescription in Bakhtin's thought.
Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works [...]. The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. [...] He must expand and deepen his own language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent language can be transformed, almost the way dialect differs from dialect. (GS IV 20; SW I 261-62)

A good translation would be the double-voiced discourse implied in the transformation of German into Hindi. This is the interaction of the other in the word of the subject. It is also heteroglossia in action, one language being deeply affected by another. Pannwitz’s reference to dialect at the end of the quotation also points to an awareness of the existence not only of ‘national’ languages but also of the internal stratification of languages into dialects, idiolects, argots, and so forth, which also may be the subject of ‘translation’. Additionally, however, Pannwitz notes that most translation is bad translation.

Whilst Benjamin’s essay is, in one part, a blueprint for what the translator should do, in another significant part, it is a polemic against bad translation. The epitome of bad translation is the paradox that is aimed at by the majority of translators: that the free translation should read as if it were originally written in the language into which the text has been translated. This would be an appearance of originality which would represent a falsification. In such a translation, the language of the original has been obliterated. The word of the other has been reduced to silence. In ‘Translation - For or Against’, Benjamin describes a confrontation with such a translation:

As I was passing an open-air bookstall a few days ago, I came across a French translation of a German philosophical book. Looking through it, as one does with books on the quais, I looked for the passages which had often engrossed me. What a surprise – the passages were not there. You mean, you didn’t find them? Oh yes, I found them alright. But when I looked them in the face, I had the awkward feeling that they no more recognized me than I did them. (GS VI 157-58; SW III 249)
Here the language of the original no longer speaks through the translation. There is no friendly greeting. Translation has become what Bakhtin terms in his early works, transcription, a process in which concrete subjectivity is erased through a process of abstraction, the form of translation of which Bakhtin speaks in his notes towards a reworking of the Dostoevsky book: 'I translate into the language of an abstract worldview that which was the object of concrete and living artistic visualization and which then became a principle of form. Such a translation is inadequate' (DP 288).

There is, however, more in Benjamin’s dialogue. In the ‘awkward feeling’ the translation ‘no more recognizes’ Benjamin than he it, one can discern an echo of Benjamin’s statements on the nature of the aura in ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’. The first incarnation of this theory is to be found in Benjamin’s essay, ‘A Short History of Photography’ (1931). In early photography, Benjamin notes, the long exposure times meant that the person being photographed had to concentrate in a way which the more modern snap-shot does not require: ‘The procedure itself caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it; during the considerable period of the exposure the subject as it were grew into the picture’ (GS II 373; SW II 514). This concentration of the subject’s gaze is one of the reasons for the aura which we experience when looking at early photographs. Speaking of an early portrait of Kafka, dressed up in a ‘humiliatingly tight child’s suit’ in the bizarre artificial environment of the photographer’s studio, Benjamin comments:

This picture in its infinite sadness forms a pendant to the early photographs in which people did not look out at the world in so excluded and god-forsaken a manner as this boy. There was an aura about them, an atmospheric medium, that lent fullness and security to their gaze. (GS II 375-76; SW II 515)

Aura here is the ability of the subject’s gaze to survive the process of objectification that is inherent in having one’s photograph taken. Auratic experience is a form of, or intimation of, intersubjectivity. As Habermas comments: ‘the auratic appearance can occur only in the intersubjective

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44 Benjamin’s conception of aura, then, has a great many of the attributes of Bakhtin’s conception of dialogue.
relationship of the I with its counterpart, the alter ego’. Put simply: auratic experience is a form of dialogue.

What we see in the image of the translation encountered on the quai is a translation in which the subjectivity of the original has been erased and from which the original subject can no longer look out. A further definition of the aura, this time from ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, serves to put Benjamin’s thinking into perspective:

Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. (GS I 646-47; SW IV 338)

If the aura is experiencing the object as subject, in bad translation the subject of the original text is experienced as an object that cannot look back at the reader of the translation and recognize him.

Bad translation is the practice of the majority of translators. Benjamin comments in the notes for the radio broadcast: ‘The fact that a book is translated already created a certain misunderstanding of it. Jean Christophe: what is selected is usually what could also be written in the translator’s own language’ (GS V I 159, SW III 250-51). Translation usually focuses only on those texts which do not require the complex interaction of languages. Benjamin’s theory of good and bad translation implies that there are two different ways of translating, two different forms of linguistic practice that are opposed to each other, but both equally possible. Caygill remarks:

Human language is equivocal: it can either reduce all other linguistic surfaces to its own level, confining them within its limits at the price

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46 Typically, however, Benjamin is able to see seeds of hope, even in a degraded phenomenon such as bad translation. His notes read: ‘The value of bad translations – productive misunderstandings’ (GS VI 159; SW III 250). Whilst bad translation (in Benjamin’s special sense) objectifies and does not produce the newness of a good translation, errors in bad translations (here, ‘bad’ I take to imply the conventional sense of containing errors) can help create something new.
of exclusion and distortion, or it can transform the character and limits
of its own surface in the translation of other languages.47

These two tendencies are, in the terms of Bakhtin's Dostoevsky book, the
tendencies towards monologization and dialogization:

Whatever discourse types are introduced by the author-monologist,
whatever their compositional distribution, the author's intentions and
evaluations must dominate all the others and must form a compact and
unambiguous whole. Any intensification of others' intentions in a
certain discourse is only a game, which the author permits so that his
own direct or refracted word might ring out all the more energetically.
[...] The artistic task Dostoevsky takes on is completely different. He
does not fear the most extreme activization of vari-directional accents
in double-voiced discourse; on the contrary, such activization is
precisely what he needs to achieve his purpose. (DP 203-04)

Where monologic language excludes, distorts and confines the other within its
own limits, dialogic language is itself transformed by the language of the other.
Monologue is German making Hindi German. Dialogue is German being
powerfully affected by Hindi. There is a great difference between Bakhtin and
Benjamin, however: Benjamin expresses his idea of translation with the powerful
but vague image of the good translation that is German being affected by Hindi.
Bakhtin, in the chapter on 'Discourse in Dostoevsky', by contrast, has a highly
sophisticated linguistic analysis of the different ways in which dialogic discourse
can function in the novel.48

Quotation and Montage

Benjamin's use of quotation is at the core of all his writing.49 It finds its fullest
expression in The Arcades Project, much of which is no more than lists of
quotations. Here, Benjamin indicates that quotation is a form of montage, forms
that share an intimate kinship: 'This work has to develop the highest degree of
citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage'
(GS V 572; AP 458). In the same section, he elaborates:

47 Caygill, Benjamin, p. 19
48 This is the analysis of different forms of discourse from direct unmediated discourse, through
objectified discourse to various forms of discourse with an orientation towards someone else's
discourse. Bakhtin gives a diagrammatic presentation of the scheme that results. See DP, p. 199.
49 Voigts argues for the central place of quotation in Benjamin's thought in Manfred Voigts,
'Zitat', in Opitz and Wizisla (eds), Benjamins Begriffe, pp. 826-50.
Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. *(GS V 574; AP 460)*

The montage of quotations is a means of seeking the other’s word. Benjamin need not speak, may allow the other’s voice to be heard.

Bakhtin is also a writer who uses quotation. Often, in the early work, this is quotation without acknowledgement; in his work more generally, quotation frequently takes the form of the use of many different variations and reformulations of similar arguments, a phenomenon which constitutes a form of hidden self-quotation, a technique also employed by Benjamin. *50* His work, then, is also akin to a montage of quotations. *51* He remarks in his notes from 1970-71:

> The unity of the becoming (developing) idea. There is also a certain internal unfinishedness in many of my thoughts. But I do not wish to make a vice into a virtue: in my works there is good deal of external unfinishedness, an unfinishedness not of thought itself, but of its expression and exposition. Sometimes it is difficult to separate one kind of unfinishedness from the other [...]. My love for variations and for a multiplicity of terms for a single phenomenon. A multiplicity of perspectives. A bringing close of the distant without an indication of mediating links. *(SG 155)*

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*50* Benjamin’s incessant self-quotation has practical grounds. Given that for much of his life he was a freelance writer and critic, often in acute financial difficulties, self-quotation proved a means of producing more copy. This can be seen in his recycling of fundamentally the same material for different commissioners. Nevertheless, this does not go against the fact that Benjamin sees (with Bakhtin) the importance of variations of the same material that produce new formulations and new ideas in their new contexts. This is another area where the themes of repetition and difference emerge in both thinkers.

*51* Gardiner has some perspicacious comments on Bakhtin’s similarity to Ernst Bloch, someone with whom Benjamin also has many similarities. '[…] one could mention Bloch’s fragmentary and elliptical prose style which, by drawing on expressionist techniques (including Brecht’s “alienation effect”), attempts to induce a defamiliarization of the taken-for-granted in order to generate an awareness of alternative possibilities. This recalls Bakhtin’s confessed “love for variations and for a diversity of terms for a single phenomenon [and the] multiplicity of focuses”.' Gardiner, ‘Bakhtin’s Carnival’, p. 42. Whilst he does not say it, Gardiner seems to have noticed the kinship between Bloch’s Expressionist technique of montage and Bakhtin’s method of thinking and writing. For the connections between Bloch and Benjamin, see Wolin, *Benjamin*, pp. 16-17 and 23-27. Brodersen gives biographical details of Benjamin and Bloch’s friendship in Brodersen, *Benjamin*, pp. 99-100. Bloch discusses his wary friendship with Benjamin in Ernst Bloch, ‘Recollections of Walter Benjamin’, in Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin*, pp. 338-45. Specifically he discusses Benjamin’s use of montage on pp. 341-42.
Bakhtin’s ‘bringing close of the distant without an indication of mediating links’ is analogous to Benjamin’s ‘citing without quotation marks’. Variations are, as already argued, forms of quotation; multiple perspectives and unfinishedness are all hallmarks of montage. One need only think of montage in cinema to see that Bakhtin’s ‘multiple perspectives’ are a form of montage. The same holds for ‘unfinishedness’: the piece of montage is cut (once again we can hear the association with cinema) from a larger whole to which it still points; it is, then, necessarily unfinished, just as a quotation is a fragment of a larger context and is hence also, in this sense, unfinished. Finally, Bakhtin’s ‘bringing close’ is also a function of montage which takes material from different and distant contexts and brings them together on one plane. One thinks of the montage of Dada or Surrealist collage which takes cuttings and scraps from different sources and juxtaposes or overlays them in proximity on the canvas.

Bakhtin’s thought demonstrates a concern with forms of language that are comparable to the montage of quotations. In his theory of the polyphonic novel, Bakhtin champions the fragmentation of perspective and voice which the novel effects on what he terms ‘unitary languages’. In the face of the unities which come into being through the centripetal forces of monologic discourse, Bakhtin is concerned with the plurality of polyphony: ‘alongside verbal-ideological 

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52 Both thinkers could be construed as ideologues of plagiarism. Their attitude to quotation resembles the medieval. A good number of the quotations produced by Benjamin in theTrauerspiel book cannot be traced to any verifiable sources.

53 Bürger develops his theory of the Avant-garde on the basis of Benjamin’s theory of montage, suggesting that montage is the main weapon of the Avant-garde’s attack on organic works of art in the name of the sublation of art and life. Despite my criticisms of Bürger below, seeing a theory of montage in Bakhtin allows one to think of him as a much more modernist thinker and writer than he might at first seem, given his apparent lack of interest in the historical Avant-garde movements of which he was a contemporary. See Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis MN, 1984, particularly pp. 73-82. The question of Bakhtin’s relation to the Avant-garde is contested. I have already made some comments on this in relation to Bakhtin and Russian Formalism. Tiupa implies that Bakhtin’s aesthetics are necessarily hostile to the Avant-garde’s ‘radical pessimism’ in Valerii Tiupa, ‘The Architectonics of Aesthetic Discourse’. In Shepherd (ed.), The Contexts of Bakhtin, pp. 95-107. In the same volume, however, Pechey, arguing for Bakhtin’s modernity and seeing a possible reincarnation of Bakhtin’s Rabelais in James Joyce, contends that ‘Bakhtin’s modernist critique of modernity [...] is achieved by the simple and yet astonishingly creative gesture of projecting the story of the European avant-garde back into the continent’s past’. Graham Pechey, ‘Modernity and Chronotopocity in Bakhtin’, in Shepherd (ed.), The Contexts of Bakhtin, pp. 173-82 (180). Benjamin explicitly associates himself with the Avant-garde. Jennings traces in an elegant fashion Benjamin’s ‘waking up’ to the Avant-garde ‘sometime in 1924’. Michael Jennings, ‘Walter Benjamin and the European Avant-garde’, in Ferris (ed.), Companion to Benjamin, pp. 18-34.
centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward' (*DI* 272). The plurality of the novel – ‘the dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia’ (*DI* 263) - is a plurality of fragments. The world of the polyphonic novel of Dostoevsky, then, is a montage of perspectives and voices, quoted directly and indirectly. Nevertheless, just as Benjamin insists that the montage of quotations in the *Arcades Project* retains a relation to the totality of nineteenth-century Paris, so Bakhtin insists that the fragmented voices of polyphony retain a complex relation to 'social totality'.

I have argued in Chapter 1 that montage and dialogized discourse are both ways of opening up the closedness of authoritarianism, whether this be the authority of the aura and tradition or the authority of the monologic utterance. Both forms, then, have an ideological import. Both thinkers, however, insist on the historical specificity of their particular forms. These are not forms of which they merely approve because of their innovative or ideological effects; both grow necessarily out of their social and historical circumstances. Buck-Morss points out the extent to which montage in the *Arcades Project* was more than just a formal principle:

Crucial is Benjamin’s understanding of ‘montage’ as a form which, if already visible in the early arcades, in the kaleidoscopic, fortuitous juxtaposition of shop sign and window displays, was raised by technology during the course of the century to the level of a conscious principle of the nineteenth century.\(^5^4\)

Montage is both the form of construction of nineteenth-century Paris and the only way to represent it without distorting it. Something similar holds for Bakhtin’s treatment of Dostoevsky in a passage that I have quoted above:

By relativizing all that was eternally stable, set and ready made, carnivalization with its pathos of change and renewal permitted Dostoevsky to penetrate into the deepest layers of man and human relationships. It proved remarkably productive as a means for capturing in art the developing relationships under capitalism, at a time when previous forms of life, moral principles and beliefs were being turned into ‘rotten cords’ and the previously concealed and unfinalized nature of man and human thought was being nakedly exposed. [...] Capitalism, similar to that 'pander' of Socrates on the

\(^{54}\) Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 74.
market square in Athens, brings together people and ideas. *(DP 166-67)*

In this passage, Bakhtin asserts both the emergence of dialogue from the spirit of capitalism and its status as the only faithful means of its representation.\(^5\)

There are, however, marked central differences between Bakhtin and Benjamin. Benjamin’s employment of montage is linked to a much more explicitly political task than Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony. Jennings comments: ‘Benjamin’s practice [of montage] stems from the Dadaist conviction that it is only that which lies unused or already discarded that is free of the ideological contamination of the ruling formation.’\(^6\) Thus it is not merely the form of montage that is political but also its content. Benjamin’s montage, as practised in ‘One-Way Street’ and the *Arcades Project*, elevates to the level of attention all that is unsuccessful, marginal, misused, obsolescent, forgotten or overlooked.\(^7\) Bakhtin does not explicitly address this aspect of polyphony in his theory of the novel. Such an attitude, it might be argued, is more strongly present, less in Bakhtin himself than in his model Dostoevsky, whose fiction gives voice to the unsuccessful, the obsolescent, the misused, and the overlooked.

Some of the general connections between Benjamin’s notions of quotation and montage and Bakhtin’s theory of the polyphonic novel should now be clear. To examine this in more detail, I turn to a review of Alfred Döblin’s novel of 1930, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which Benjamin published under the title ‘The Crisis of the Novel’. This review also reveals the extent to which Benjamin comes close to the formulation of a theory of the polyphonic novel. Benjamin writes:

\(^5\) Montage and polyphony, then, are both forms of mimesis and are not opposed to it, as might be assumed. The deconstruction of traditional mimetic forms is carried out both in response to a radically new reality and for the sake of a new form of mimesis. Adorno makes a similar point in his interpretation of Baudelaire’s poetry as a disruption of traditional mimetic forms: ‘The new is the aesthetic seal of expanded reproduction, with its promise of undiminished plenitude. Baudelaire’s poetry was the first to codify that, in the midst of the fully developed commodity society, art can ignore this tendency only at the price of its powerlessness. [...] Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent; this is why art no longer tolerates the innocuous.’ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, London, 1997, p. 21.


\(^7\) Here, we see again the themes of memory and attentiveness, raised at the end of the previous chapter.
The stylistic principle governing this book is that of montage. Pettibourgeois printed matter, scandal-mongering, stories of accidents, the sensational incidents of 1928, folk songs and advertisements rain down in this text. The montage explodes the framework of the novel, bursts its limits both stylistically and structurally, and clears the way for new epic possibilities. (*GS III* 232; *SW II* 301)

The technique of montage, as, for example, pioneered in Dadaism, is the taking of fragments of the real world and incorporating them in the work of art. These are the ticket-stubs and scraps of newspaper stuck onto Dadaist paintings that Benjamin refers to in 'The Work of Art'. In literary form, montage consists of the direct quotation of fragments of reality such as the songs and advertisements referred to in Benjamin’s review. Just as Benjamin argues in 'The Work of Art' that montage destroys the art-work's aura of authenticity and originality, so here he argues that the montage of quotations 'explodes the framework of the novel' that consists of authorial authority.

Montage of quotation subverts the authority of the author and pushes him to the edge of his own work:

The texture of [Döblin's] montage is so dense that we have difficulty hearing the author's voice. He has reserved for himself the street-ballad-like epigraphs to each character; otherwise, he is no great hurry to make his voice heard. (Even though he is determined to have his say in the end.) It is astounding how long he trails behind his characters before risking any challenge to them. (*GS III* 233; *SW II* 301)

The characters gain independence from the authorial context to the extent that the author 'trails behind them' not daring to challenge them. What we observe here is an explosion of the framework of the novel and a clearing of the way for new narrative possibilities that is analogous to the Copernican revolution that Bakhtin claims Dostoevsky effects in the creation of the polyphonic novel: as the world takes on a whole 'new look', 'not only the reality of the hero himself, but even the external world and the everyday life surrounding him are drawn into the process of self-awareness, are transferred from the author’s to the hero’s field of vision' (*DP* 49). According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky renounces his position of authority above his characters and descends to a plane on which he is, in certain respects,
their equal. In Benjamin’s analysis of Döblin, the author is also reduced to a peripheral figure who ‘trails behind his characters’.

Benjamin’s characterization of Döblin’s novel as montage derives from a saying of Döblin himself that Brecht was fond of quoting. Brecht’s own formulation of this bears examination:

[Actually, there is a] dramatic element in epic works, and an epic element in the dramatic. The bourgeois novel in the [nineteenth] century developed much that was dramatic, by which one means the strong centralization of the story, a momentum that drew the separate parts into a common relationship. [...] The epic writer Döblin came up with an excellent characterization when he said that with an epic, as opposed to a dramatic, work you can as it were take a pair of scissors and cut it into individual pieces which remain fully capable of life.58

Brecht recognizes the aspect of the dramatic, traditional novel that centralizes and draws separate parts into a common relationship. This common relationship is analogous to what Bakhtin describes as the single consciousness of the monologic author. The epic writer, however, according to Brecht, produces a form of montage which consists of parts that can be cut up. This sort of cutting-up into fragments is one in which, perhaps paradoxically, the individual pieces ‘remain fully capable of life’. Hence, just as Döblin’s characters are able to walk in front of their author, so, in Brecht’s and Benjamin’s theory, montage does not kill the ‘life’ in the material. It is the closedness of authoritarian forms that does that.59

Similarly, Bakhtin writes concerning the polyphonic novel: ‘In Dostoevsky’s larger design, the character is a carrier of a fully valid word, and not the mute,

58 Bertolt Brecht, ‘Vergnügungs-Theater oder Lehrtheater’, in Schriften zum Theater, pp. 60-74 (61-62). Brecht uses the term ‘epic’ in a completely different sense from Bakhtin. His opposition of ‘epic’ and ‘dramatic’ is the cornerstone of his theory of theatre. Benjamin appropriates and expands this theory in his various writings on Brecht.

59 One might, with Bürger, map Brecht’s distinction between dramatic and epic art onto a distinction between organic and inorganic art, a distinction that Bürger develops on the basis of Benjamin’s theory of allegory. Bürger describes this distinction as follows: ‘Artists who produce an organic work (in what follows we shall refer to them as classicists...) treat their material as something living. They respect its significance as something that has grown from concrete life situations. For avant-gardistes, on the other hand, material is everything. Their activity initially consists in nothing other than in killing the ‘life’ of the material, that is, in tearing it out of its functional context that gives it meaning. Whereas the classicist recognizes and respects in the material the carrier of a meaning, the avant-gardistes see only the empty sign, to which they can impart significance. The classicist correspondingly treats the material as a whole, whereas the avant-gardiste tears it out of the life totality, isolates it, and turns it into a fragment.’ Bürger, Theory of the Avant-garde, p. 70. Nevertheless, Bürger seems to miss the point that, for Benjamin, montage preserves the life of its material.
voiceless object of the author's discourse' (DP 63). The monologic approach that stems from a sense of a false wholeness kills life, reducing it to a series of mute objects. It is precisely because Bakhtin insists that the world be conceived of as a unity of living subjects who are carriers of meaning that it must be represented in the form of a montage of multiple perspectives and voices.

Benjamin goes on to characterize Döblin's mode of narration:

He approaches things in a relaxed way as befits an epic writer. Whatever happens – even when it happens suddenly – seems to have been prepared for well in advance. In this attitude, he has been inspired by the spirit of Berlin dialect – a dialect that moves at a relaxed pace. For the Berliner speaks as a connoisseur, in love with the way things are said. [...] The book is a monument to the Berlin dialect because the narrator makes no attempt to enlist our sympathies for the city based on any regional loyalty. He speaks from within Berlin. It is his megaphone. His dialect is one of the forces that turn against the reserved nature of the old novel. (GS III 233; SW II 301)

We may first note the theme of habit that re-emerges in the notion of Döblin's relaxed attitude. This is the relaxation that comes from a sense of familiarity. More important in this context, however, is Benjamin's discussion of the role of dialect. When Benjamin says that Döblin 'speaks from within Berlin', it might be argued that he means that Berlin speaks from within Döblin. Döblin's text is inter-penetrated with different forms of language: thieves' cant, the biblical, prostitutes' slang, the Yiddish-influenced German of newly-arrived Ostjuden, and, above all the heterogeneous, linguistic monster that is berlinerisch. This is akin to Bakhtin's description of heteroglossia in 'Discourse in the Novel':

Languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways: the Ukrainian language, the language of the epic poem, or early Symbolism, of the student, of a particular generation of children... [...] as such these languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia. (DI 292-93)

Specifically, Döblin achieves this not merely by dialogue and by the montage of direct quotation but also by indirect quotation, that is, a variety of different forms of double-voiced discourse. This can be seen in the following passage:

Dann wird mit einemmal die Unterhaltung am Nebentisch laut, der eine Neue führt das grosse Wort. Der will singen, dem ist es hier zu
Franz kaut, denkt: die meinen mir. [...] Daß der alter Georg Dreske sich mit solchem Grünzeug zusammensetzt und nicht mal zu ihm rüberkommt, hätt er auch nicht für möglich gehalten. Son oderle Stiebel, ist verheiratet, n ehrlicher Stiebel, und sitzt bei det junge Gemüse und hört sich die ihr Geschnatter an.60

The standard German of the first clause represents authorial direct discourse which is lightly inflected by the discourse of Franz in the second half’s colloquialisms (‘der eine Neue’, ‘das grosse Wort’). The next sentence is double-voiced, free indirect discourse of Franz’s thoughts which gradually becomes more and more inflected by Franz’s speech patterns (although these are already present in the dialect use of the dative for the accusative in the sentence, ‘die meinen mir’). Finally, authorial discourse is almost forced out entirely in the strong dialect forms (‘oller’, ‘det’) and slang expressions (‘det junge Gemüse’, ‘Stiebel’) of the last sentence which is heavily stylized discourse.

It is in the range of forms of double-voiced discourse that Döblin speaks from within Berlin and Berlin speaks from within him. Benjamin performs no such analysis of Döblin’s prose and nor did he possess the technical vocabulary to do so. Nevertheless, Döblin’s narrator finds the other’s word and achieves the sphere of neutrality vis-à-vis subject and object that has been the goal of Benjamin’s philosophy since his early writings. One might suggest that Jay’s judgement of Benjamin above is incorrect: Benjamin seems at least to have intuited that the indirect discourse of the polyphonic novel transcends the antinomies of subject and object; he simply does not enunciate it thus.61

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60 Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Frankfurt/Main, 1980, pp. 92-93. A rough translation, which unfortunately preserves little of the complexity of different registers and dialect forms, reads as follows: ‘When all of a sudden the conversation on the neighbouring table grows louder, the one newcomer starts talking big. He wants to sing, it’s too quiet for him here. Franz chews, thinks: they mean me. He wouldn’t have believed it possible that old Georg Dreske sits with younguns like that and doesn’t even come over to his table. What an old boot, married, a right old boot, and sits by that kid and listens to her nattering.’

Silence
In May 1916, Buber wrote to the young Walter Benjamin asking him to contribute an article to the first issue of a new journal, Der Jude. In effect, Buber was asking Benjamin to take a political position within the current debates on Zionism and the position of the Jews in Germany. Benjamin refused in a letter that reflects his emerging philosophy of language:

There is a widely accepted, indeed almost commonsensical, opinion that writing is capable of influencing the ethical world and human actions, in so far as it can provide actors with motives. [...] It is characteristic of this view that it is wholly incapable of conceiving of a relation between language and deed in which the former would not be the means to the latter. This relation presents language and writing as powerless, and diminished to the role of a pure medium; thus a weakened act whose source lies not in itself, but in this or that speakable, expressible motive. (Briefe 125-26)

Benjamin goes on to oppose this debased form of language to what he calls the ‘essential being’ of language and writing:

I can understand writing in general, whether poetic, prophetic, or objective in its effect, only magically, that is, only immediately. Every sound and healthy effect of language - indeed every effect that does not represent a self-demolition of language, touches upon mystery (of the word, of language). Whatever the form in which language is capable of proving itself effective, this cannot be through communication of its contents, but rather through the purest revelation of its own worth, and its own essence. [...] My conception of straightforward and at the same time highly political style and writing is to indicate that which fails words; only there, only where the sphere of wordlessness reveals itself in its pure power can the magic spark between word and deed arise. (Briefe 126)

If language is to go beyond its ‘self-demolition’, it must not limit itself to an auxiliary role as the instrument of communication. Effective language must reveal that aspect of itself that is incommunicable and express the unsayable (Das Unsagbare) which cannot be assimilated to the mere communication of content. Here, language finds the expression of its ‘essential being’. Many of the concerns of this chapter are recognizable here. The rejection of an instrumental conception of language may be political insofar as it resists the reduction of the world into manipulating subjects and manipulated objects. Nevertheless, its claim
of absolute political significance does not prevent it from falling into the apolitical abyss of silence.

Benjamin abandons this theory of silence in favour of a study of literary and artistic forms in which language is not reduced to mere instrumentality. Nevertheless, the search for the other’s word through silence is something that reappears sporadically. It is there in the statement on montage that I have given above, where Benjamin claims that he need not speak but merely allow the rags and refuse of montaged quotations to come into their own. It is there in Benjamin’s approving comment on Kraus: ‘Kraus has written articles in which not a single word is his own’ (GS II 1093). The sacrifice of one’s own voice may sometimes be necessary if one is to find the voice of the other.

Bakhtin’s theory of silence is to be found in his essays on the novel. During the course of Bakhtin’s work it is possible to observe a gradual shift in his formulation of the ideal position of the author in relation to his work. In the early work, the author is a benign but over-reaching, all-encompassing figure whose creative word shapes his hero. In Bakhtin’s writing on Dostoevsky this position has changed; here, the author has relinquished the position of absolute authority and has descended to the level of his characters and the author’s word is to be no more authoritative than those of his characters. By the time of the essays on the novel, this position has changed yet again. Here, ‘it is as if the author has no language of his own’:

The author is not to be found in the language of the narrator, not in the normal literary language to which the story opposes itself […] but rather the author utilizes now one language, now another, in order to avoid giving himself up wholly to either of them. (DI 311)

The author’s unwillingness to speak in his own voice is another way of allowing the other to come to voice. His silence is an act of self-renunciation and a quest for the other’s word.62

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62 My argument here coincides with that of Coates who notes the withdrawal of the author into silence over the course of Bakhtin’s work. See Coates, Christianity in Bakhtin, particularly pp. 116–18. Lock also treats the theme of silence in Bakhtin. His focus, however, is on a Derridean reading of the fact that Bakhtin favours the silently-read genre of the novel to voiced genres. See
The History of Language: Fall, Monologism and Mutism

Bakhtin and Benjamin see language as a practice that is rooted in history and the nature of which changes historically. Furthermore, we have seen that they both conceive of language as the site of opposing tendencies and phenomena - instrumental and non-instrumental language, bad and good translation, the authoritative and the internally persuasive word, monologue and dialogue - in which one side of the opposition is generally preferred. These tendencies and the relationships between them also develop historically.

As we have seen, in Toward a Philosophy of the Act Bakhtin writes: ‘Historically language grew up in the service of participative thinking and performed acts, and it begins to serve abstract thinking only in the present day of its history’ (*TPA* 31). In this early text, Bakhtin is perhaps thinking ahead of himself to the theory of language discussed above according to which language is the site of intersubjective unity which precedes the antinomies of subject and object. Language, Bakhtin argues, emerges from responsible participation but, in the face of modern forces of theoreticism, becomes degraded and instrumentalized. In his work taken as a whole, however, Bakhtin has a contradictory account of the historical fate of language: on the one hand, modern theoreticism and monologism, sometimes explicitly associated with the Enlightenment and the modern era, threaten to obliterate the participative nature of language as dialogue. On the other hand, dialogue itself seems to grow out of the very social and historical forces of modernization. In essence, the contradiction is to be found between the narrative of the liberation of the dialogized word from authoritarian contexts in Bakhtin’s theory of the development of the novel and the narrative of the decline of the participative word and the threat of monologization.63

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63 One may also consider here Voloshinov’s chronology of reported and reporting speech as the increasing decomposition of the authorial context. See MPL, pp. 120-23. I discuss Voloshinov’s history of language in the next chapter.
Benjamin's work also contains a history of the fate of language. To discuss this most effectively, I return to 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' whose narrative of the Fall nevertheless contains the essence of Benjamin's ideas about the historical existence of language in the secular world. The Fall is brought about by Adam and Eve's seduction by the serpent into eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Benjamin points out that since God created the world and saw that it was good, the knowledge of good and evil is worthless and vain (*nichtig*). Such knowledge's vanity has two sources: first, knowledge of good and evil stands beyond the created world, which is of itself good, and is hence meaningless (Benjamin uses Kierkegaard's term, prattle [*Geschwätz*]); second, in attempting to replace God's judgement of the world as good, it becomes a parody of God's creative word.

By establishing himself as subjective judge, man brings evil into the world. Pensky comments: 'subjectivity is the origin of evil, the source of meaninglessness of "chatter"'. As the knower of good and evil, man abandons the language of name in which he knew an intersubjective unity with God and nature and enters the sphere of judgement: 'this judging word expels human beings from paradise; [...] In the Fall, since the eternal purity of names was violated, the sterner purity of the judging word arose'. (*GS II* 153; *SW I* 71) Here is Hölderlin's *Ur-theilung*. In setting himself up as autonomous judge of the external world, man is separated from it and is condemned, by his own actions, to the mediated existence of a subject in an alien world of objects. This is how Benjamin understands the expulsion from Paradise. Benjamin draws further consequences from the introduction of the prattle of judgement. First, 'man makes language a means (that is knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part, a *mere* sign' (*GS II* 153; *SW I* 71). Language comes to be

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64 Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, p. 54. 'Chatter' is Pensky's translation of *Geschwätz*.
65 Benjamin's ingenious response to the question of why the tree of good and evil is planted in the garden runs as follows: 'The tree of knowledge did not stand in the garden in order to dispense information on good and evil, but as an emblem of judgment over the questioner' (*GS II* 154; *SW I* 71).
66 He adds that 'this results later in the plurality of languages'. This point is a reversal of Saussure's argument for the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. Saussure argues that the sign must be arbitrary on the basis of the existence of different words in different languages for the same concept. 'No reason can be given for preferring *sister* to *soeur*, *Ochs* to *boeuf*, etc.'
dominated by its instrumentality, which is intimately linked to its acquiring an
arbitrary nature. Second, the Fall is the origin of abstraction in so far as its
knowledge is unnameable, whereas name is rooted in the concrete.67

Benjamin’s narrative of the Fall brings us, once again, to Bakhtin. As
Coates has pointed out, there is a theme of the Fall that runs through Bakhtin’s
work. In her reading of ‘Author and Hero’, the Fall is the result of Man’s attempt
to claim self-sufficiency from God.68 This is analogous to Benjamin’s
understanding of the Fall as the imposition of human terms of judgment. In both
cases, man attempts to speak his own definitive word without listening to the
voice of God. The fallen word, for both Bakhtin and Benjamin, one might
suggest, is the self-sufficient word that is deaf to the word of the other.

The theme of judgement as a consequence of the Fall forms a further bridge
between Benjamin and Bakhtin. Brandist has argued forcefully for the influence
of the Marburg School’s theory of law and the juridical person on Bakhtin.69
Whilst it is difficult to accept many of his arguments for the extent of this
influence, his observation that Bakhtin’s thinking often carries a framework of
judgement seems correct.70 We might explain this by noting that in Dostoevsky’s
novels characters are always on trial. Bakhtin does not share with Benjamin an

Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, p. 73. Benjamin argues that different languages have
come into being because the sign has become arbitrary.
67 Benjamin sums up his position as follows: ‘The immediacy in the communication of abstraction
came into being as judgement when in the Fall, man abandoned immediacy in the communication
of the concrete, name, and fell into the abyss of the mediatedness of all communication, of
the word, as means, of the empty word, into the word of prattle’ (GS I 154; SW I 72).
68 ‘Bakhtin claims that to pretend to axiological self-sufficiency is to fall into a state of profound
self-contradiction and self-negation, to live a lie: “We may say that this is the fall [grekhopadenie]
which is immanent to being and experienced from within it; it lies in the tendency of being
towards self-sufficiency.”’ Coates, Christianity in Bakhtin, pp. 44-45. Coates gives her own
translation here which makes clear Bakhtin’s reference to the theological concept of the Fall, a
reference which is obscured in Liapunov’s translation.
69 See Craig Brandist, ‘The Hero at the Bar of Eternity: The Bakhtin Circle’s Juridical Theory of
70 Brandist’s arguments on this point can be over-dogmatic. He gives, for example, the following
reductionist reading of Bakhtin’s analysis of Dostoevsky: ‘[Bakhtin] follows the neo-Kantian trend
of treating individuals not as concretely singular and embodied beings subjected to material
economic and social influences, but as juridical persons who are exclusively considered as bearers
of rights and responsibilities. […] This inevitably imposes a particular character on work that
adopts such a principle and this should be clearly recognized before Bakhtin’s categories are
employed in literary analysis today.’ Brandist, The Bakhtin Circle, p. 94.
aversion to the notion of judgement on the philosophical grounds that I have discussed above; indeed right from his early work he insists that every act has an evaluative, that is to say, a judging function. Nevertheless, Bakhtin is always keen to stress that the act of judgement must be just. If in the dialogic utterance, the position of the other being judged is taken into account (his specific circumstances, his possible excuses), the monologic utterance is an unjust judgement that imposes the judgement without regard for the position of the judged and judges an inert object. The former may be approximated to the act of Benjamin's namer who listens to the language of God in nature and knows it. The latter may be approximated to the arbitrary judgement that fallen Man imposes on the object world.

Benjamin contends that the original language is not utterly destroyed. Language itself has become fractured in the same way that Man's relationship with God and nature has been fractured. In the damaged and distorted state of fallen language, traces of the language of names survive. Benjamin notes such a trace in the act of naming children. In a fallen world, instrumental and non-instrumental aspects, signs and names, concrete and abstract, judgement and knowledge co-exist. Benjamin's essay here deals with the mythical time of Genesis. His account of the fate of language, however, holds relevance for a modernity that is increasingly characterized by abstraction and instrumentality.

It is here that the realm of the aesthetic is of importance. For, Benjamin implies, the fracturing of language can be seen in the division of linguistic practice into the mimetic language of art and the discursive language of communication.\textsuperscript{71} Benjamin writes: 'The language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded on the language of names' (\textit{GS II} 156; \textit{SW I} 73). The language of poetry strives, despite the fallen state of language, to draw closer to the original language. In this way, poetry seeks to be a profane echo of the primordial

\textsuperscript{71} In the formulation of this split we see the influence that Benjamin has on the thought of Adorno. The notion of a dialectic of mimetic behaviour that approximates to, but does not dominate the object and rejects end-means rationalization that seeks to subsume the object to itself, forms the core of Adorno and Horkheimer's collaboration. As they put it: 'Mimesis imitates the environment but false projection makes the environment like itself.' Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, trans. by John Cumming, London, 1997, p. 18.
language of names, and ultimately it seeks to restore by human means the unity of Man, God and nature destroyed by the Fall. This view of the language of poetry is not a mere repetition of the view of Hölderlin, for Benjamin concedes that ‘it is certain that the language of art can be understood only in the deepest relationship to the doctrine of signs’ (*GS II* 156; *SW I* 73). Poetry, then, contains both name and sign. More generally, language, as what Benjamin calls elsewhere an ‘archive of non-sensuous similarities’, even in its corrupt form, bears the traces of the relation of name.  

Before I move on to a discussion of the special language of art in the next chapter, I wish to consider a final effect of the Fall of language, namely the muteness and melancholy of nature:

After the Fall, however, when God’s word curses the ground, the appearance of nature is changed. Now begins its other muteness, which we mean by the deep sadness of nature. It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language. [...] This proposition has a double meaning. It means, first: she would lament language itself. Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature (and for the sake of her redemption the life and language of man – only, as is supposed, of the poet – are in nature). This proposition means secondly: she would lament. Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language; it contains scarcely more than the sensuous breath; and even where there is only a rustling of plants, in it there is always a lament. (*GS II* 155; *SW I* 72-73)

Once again, the problem arises of how this powerful and eloquent image is to be read outside its theological framework. At the simplest level, this passage is driven by a pathetic fallacy: in his separation from nature, man laments the essential alienness to him of the natural world. This is the melancholy of alienation.

Another way of looking at this is provided by Bernstein in the context of a discussion of German Romantic aesthetics. Bernstein describes the changed relations between man and the natural world that arise with Descartes’s

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72 The term, ‘archive of non-sensuous similarities’ (*GS II* 209; *SW II* 697), comes from Benjamin’s ‘The Doctrine of the Similar’, part of his writings on mimesis which are closely related to the philosophy of language of ‘Of Language as Such and of the Language of Man’.
establishment of the *cogito* as the fundamental principle of knowledge and that are underscored by Kant’s critiques. With the establishment of the enquiring and analytical *cogito*, nature loses its self-evidence. Sensuous nature is replaced by the immaterial and mechanical forms of physics. Bernstein gives as a paradigmatic example of this Descartes’s image of the dissolution of the sensuously resplendent piece of wax into its physical properties (malleability, extension) that are comprehensible only to abstract thought. He continues:

This dematerialization denies that there might be a unique, irreducible language of nature, and this is equivalent to the delegitimation of the authority of nature in favour of the authority of scientific reason. Thus the disenchantment of nature, which included the human body, its pains and pleasures, leaves it dispossessed of voice or meaning, since all meaning is given to nature by (mathematical) reason. To say that reason delegitimates the authority of nature means at least that the promptings of the body come to lack *normative* authority, that is they no longer operate as reasons, and so cannot be thought of as raising claims and demands that should (or should not) be heeded. Such items become causal facts no different in kind than those of dead nature.

This is a useful approach. First, it makes clear the extent to which thinking about nature, particularly in the German Romantic tradition, is necessarily a meditation on human beings understood as part of nature, a meditation on human nature (*menschliche Natur*). The alienation from nature that the Romantics and Benjamin often describe in terms that today sound mystical might be as much about the relationship of the subject with the body as they are about mountains and trees. Second, this passage brings us back to the concerns of Benjamin’s ‘On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy’. The rationalist and mathematical standards of the Enlightenment do, indeed, deny normative authority to the promptings of the body. They impoverish a conception of experience – not only for ‘primitive people’ who identify with sacred animals or the mentally ill who feel that the objects of their perception are parts of their body – but also for the average person who no longer thinks that it is legitimate to feel things in her or his ‘bones’ or who has to ascribe the melancholy of November to Seasonally Affected

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Disorder. Third, Bernstein’s use of the terms, ‘promptings’, ‘reasons’, ‘demands’, leads us to understand how this is a problem of language: modern rationalism no longer allows nature to speak to us.

The melancholy of nature is the result of the imposition of Man’s arbitrary subjectivity on a world that is thereby reduced to an object, and hence is denied a voice. Bakhtin’s thought contains a similar insight of the muteness that the monologic utterance imposes on its object. In the totally instrumental, discursive and monologic form of the language of the natural sciences the world is mastered and deprived of voice:

The entire methodological apparatus of the mathematical and natural sciences is directed toward mastery over mute objects, brute things, that do not reveal themselves in words, that do not comment on themselves. Acquiring knowledge here is not connected with receiving and interpreting words or signs from the object itself under consideration. (DI 351)

So too, in the monologic novel, characters are denied a voice, they are objectified, and fall silent. As I noted in the Introduction, Bakhtin, however, often seems to be lacking the dimension of melancholy that Benjamin is so painfully aware of. Pensky has a sensitive insight into the impression that the reader receives at the end of ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’.

[N]ature is mute, but it mutters. Nature’s muttering: the image leads us into the curiously frozen dialectic that structures the language essay. Speaking and writing subjects, people who use language, who discover things in and about it, barely exist in the essay; ‘On Language as Such and on Human Language’, notwithstanding the disturbing mythic image of the world as a twittering cacophony of words, rustles, murmurs, and sighs, is a depopulated discourse. [...] [T]he subjectivist, romantic emotive atmosphere has been pumped out of the essay by the catastrophic weight of nature’s mournfulness.  

Benjamin’s mournful nature is a landscape emptied of people and frozen in melancholy. This image of the muteness of alienation makes clear the absolute need for the construction of a new relationship towards the object world and the absolute need for the invigoration of intersubjectivity. If Bakhtin’s life-affirming world of the novel is a modern world of dynamic possibilities, Benjamin’s image

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75 Pensky, Melancholy Dialectics, p. 57.
of a depopulated, mute nature is also a modern landscape. Bakhtin's and
Benjamin's theories of language and muteness present conflicting yet coexistent
aspects of modernity: landscapes of desolation as well as of possibility. Bakhtin
and Benjamin, however, are thinkers of hope. We have seen their assertions of
the possible sources of hope that are found in the activity of language. The next
chapter will examine in greater detail the sources of hope that they identify in the
languages of art.
Chapter 4: Totalities

The preceding chapters have discussed Bakhtin's and Benjamin's analysis of a world of human experience which is split. In their eyes, divisions have opened up between the central categories of the posited and the given, Erlebnis and Erfahrung, subject and object. In the face of this situation, Bakhtin and Benjamin are concerned with the overcoming of these divisions in order to bring about a restoration of a wholeness of experience. Following the theological strand which runs through both Bakhtin's and Benjamin's thought, a strand on which I enlarge in this chapter, one can speak of Man as fallen. The task that Bakhtin and Benjamin set themselves is the task of discerning how the restoration of totality and the redemption of a fallen world might best be served.¹

If this is the case, Clark and Holquist's statement on Bakhtin needs revision:

Bakhtin's ideas about language parallel ideas held by German thinkers of the Romantic period such as Wilhelm von Humboldt. But Bakhtin is utterly opposed to the Romantic longing for wholeness, that homesickness which produced the German vision of an ancient Greek Gemeinschaft from which all subsequent history has been a falling away, a second exile from Eden into a world of fatally split consciousness in the self and alienation in society. Dialogism, by contrast, celebrates alterity: it is a merry science, a fröhliche Wissenschaft of the other.²

Clark and Holquist are, only in part, correct. Bakhtin is not in line with the early Romantic philosophy of language in so far as, in his view, the fundamental wholeness of language is a complex wholeness of social plurality and alterity rather than the wholeness of the unmediated relationship of the pre-social individual with nature.³ Bakhtin's wholeness is not the totality of identity

¹ Habermas highlights the importance of the concept of Rettung (rescuing, redemption) in Benjamin's thought, with the complex of theological associations that such a concept brings to mind. Habermas sees Benjamin's rescuing-critique as orientated towards a restoration of what he described as 'unmutilated experience', a 'continuum of experience'. Habermas, 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique', especially p. 106.

² Clark and Holquist, Bakhtin, p. 65.

³ The Romantic tradition sees the source of the original wholeness of language in an unmediated relationship between pre-social (natural) man as individual and the natural world. Thus, Rousseau – often nominally an Enlightenment thinker but one whom one may co-opt as a thinker whose views on language are influential in informing the Romantic sensibility of language – is keen to stress that language does not emerge as the communication of needs by one social man to another.
between man and nature that we find in the early Lukács where 'the mind's attitude [...] is a passively visionary acceptance of ready-made, ever-present meaning'. Nevertheless, contrary to Clark and Holquist, this study not only contends that Bakhtin's theory of alterity is thoroughly serious, but also that Bakhtin's thought retains a conception of a wholeness from which man has fallen away. Bakhtin's explicit concern with openness from his work on Dostoevsky onwards can only be understood in relation to a tacit concern with the completeness of totality.

Benjamin's thought contains a similar relation to the notion of an original totality. Thornhill has discussed the relationship between the early Benjamin's thought and the rightist *Ursprungsphilosophie* of the period with its emphasis on a lost original wholeness, and Benjamin's move away from such ideas during the 1930s. Benjamin's subsequent emphasis on fragmentation is such that Gilloch comments: 'The world is splintered into fragments, is legible only in fragments, and is representable solely through fragments – these are axiomatic for Benjamin.' Nevertheless, as Jameson comments, 'Benjamin's work seems [...] to be marked by a painful straining toward a psychic wholeness or unity of experience which the historical situation threatens to shatter at every turn.' Thus, Benjamin's explicit preoccupation with fragmentation can only be understood in relation to the tacit notion of totality that continues to structure his work.

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On the contrary, it is the expression of the passions of the pre-social *homme sauvage* in unmediated response to the nature around him of which he is still a relatively undifferentiated part. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (published posthumously), ed. by Catherine Kintzler, Paris, 1993, pp. 61-64. Similarly, whilst Herder argues strongly against Rousseau's conception of the origin of language in man's animal nature, proposing instead the basis of language in reason, he nevertheless considers the origin of language as a function of man as an individual being and not as a social being: 'Man is a creature who hears and notices, naturally orientated to language. Were one to put a man onto a desert island in comfort and leisure, nature would open his ears!' Johann Gottfried Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* [1772], Stuttgart, 1993, p. 45.  

4 Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 32. Clark and Holquist clearly have Lukács in mind in the above quotation, echoing his opening quotation from Novalis on the homesickness of modern man.  
Negative Totalities
Art, for Bakhtin and Benjamin, may be, at its best, a sphere of benign form-giving, in which the unruly activity of life is gathered up without sacrificing the integrity and specificity of its contents. Artistic form is to be form that does not violate life, that does not attempt to achieve mastery over life as an object but rather preserves and promotes the complexity of life as the experience of interconnected subjectivity. Andrew Benjamin and Osborne’s comment is valid as much for Bakhtin as it is for Benjamin: ‘It was in works of art that Benjamin found the self-contained form of totality he thought necessary for experience to participate in truth.’ 8 Artistic form goes some way to being the totalizing solution to the problems that emanate from the fractured nature of existence.

There are three main reasons for art’s special status in Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s thought. First, returning to the topic of the first chapter: artistic forms may, on the one hand, provide benign models of habitualization and tradition, and on the other hand, provide the tools for challenging authoritarian forms of habit and tradition. Second, returning to the conclusion of the second chapter: art provides a model of the loving attention and remembrance that may be a possible way out of the tragedy of culture. By virtue of its orientation towards the specific, art expresses and preserves plural participative activity in the face of abstraction and indifference. This notion is at the heart of Bakhtin’s theory of polyphonic prose that ‘recreates not a world of objects, but precisely these other consciousnesses with their worlds’ (DP 68). A similar notion forms the core of Benjamin’s analysis of the synthetic production of something that equates to Erfahrung from fragments of Erlebnis in writers such as Proust and Baudelaire. Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s thinking centres on the ways in which art might preserve and promote ‘responsible activity’ and ‘higher forms of experience’ in a situation where these phenomena are under permanent threat. Third, returning to the topic of the previous chapter: we have seen that Bakhtin and Benjamin share a view of language as the original and/or potential, if endangered, site of unity where the poles of the given and the posited, the general and the particular, object

and subject, are held together. Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s focus on the forms of art, and on verbal art in particular, stems from an understanding that art is the testing-ground on which language strives to capture and recapture its own essence as the site of this unity. In artistic forms, such as dialogic prose for Bakhtin and montage for Benjamin, language claims and recovers its power.

The importance that the two thinkers accord to the aesthetic is neither surprising nor original. Since Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* and the revisions of Kant in the aesthetics of the Romantic movement, the German philosophical tradition had seen aesthetic experience as the realm in which the antinomies of subject and object, general and particular might be overcome. In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin makes such special claims for aesthetic activity:

> The world of aesthetic seeing – the world of art. In its concreteness and its permeatedness with an emotional-volitional tone, this world is closer than any of the abstract cultural worlds (taken in isolation) to the unitary and unique world of the performed act. An analysis of this world should help us to come closer to an understanding of the architectonic structure of the actual world-as-event. (*TPA* 61)

This position seems to be a mere reformulation of a standard position of German Idealist aesthetics. Hirschkop is perhaps correct in arguing that Bakhtin’s philosophy of art ‘appears to be the old wine of German idealist aesthetics in a new intersubjective bottle’:

> As in Kant, aesthetic form heals the rift between the lawfulness of that which we know through natural science (which Bakhtin calls cognition) and the orientation towards ends characteristic of morality: in art we experience something both sensual and apparently purposeful: in Bakhtin’s words, existence as ‘beautiful givenness’, self-sufficient and needing no justification.9

As in Kant, aesthetic activity provides a ground on which we may develop responsible and participatory activity that, in turn, may serve indirectly to heal the rifts encountered in the contemporary non-aesthetic sphere. Similarly, Benjamin’s career-long search for the higher experience of the ‘Programme on the Coming Philosophy’ in literary and artistic forms may seem to do little more than refine and give new emphasis to familiar themes in the main strand in German

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aesthetics from Kant onwards. Thus, Benjamin’s statement, in ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, that the language of poetry is partly founded on name, seems to imply that the original relationship of wholeness between God, man and nature may survive in the aesthetic realm, and hence that this realm may provide a resource for the reinstitution of totality. In this way, Benjamin is close to thinkers such as Schiller for whom art is a means ‘to restore by means of a higher Art the totality of our nature which the arts themselves have destroyed’. Both thinkers, then, stand in the tradition that thinks of art as a sphere for education understood as Bildung: the cultivation of the aesthetic will help to educate ourselves into a more harmonious relationship with ourselves and our world.

Nevertheless, whilst there is no doubt that Bakhtin and Benjamin work within this tradition, their conclusions on the role of aesthetic experience and on those artistic forms that best promote it go beyond and significantly alter that same tradition. Most notably, their contribution to this tradition lies in their parallel recognition that art, in the cause of permanent and transcendent wholeness and completion, must adopt a provisional aesthetics of fragmentation and openness. For both thinkers, in the end, celebrate not artistic forms that produce images of totality, forms such as the traditional organic art-work whose parts combine into a harmonious whole, but rather forms such as the polyphonic novel and montage which present the world in terms of open fragmentation. As a result, Bakhtin and Benjamin seem to be going beyond what Eagleton terms the

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11 Tihanov has drawn attention to the importance of the notion of aesthetic Bildung in Bakhtin’s work, particularly in Bakhtin’s texts on Goethe and in the first version of the Dostoevsky book. For both thinkers, the Bildung of aesthetic experience acts equally on both creators and contemplators of art. As Bakhtin notes: ‘In form I find myself, find my own productive, axiologically form-giving, activity. I feel intensely my own movement that is creating the object, and I do so not only in primary creation, not only during my own performance, but also during the contemplation of the work of art. I must to some extent experience myself as the creator of form, in order to actualize the artistically valid form as such’ *(AH 304)*. Benjamin’s preoccupation with both creator and contemplator is more consistently noticeable.

12 Bakhtin uses the opposition of open and closed; Benjamin prefers the opposition of fragment and whole. Despite this different conceptual vocabulary, both thinkers seem to be concerned with totality and its opposite (openness/fragmentation). The matter is complicated by the fact that one can present the terms of these oppositions positively (‘completeness’ and ‘openness’, for example, tend to carry positive associations) or negatively (similarly, ‘closedness’ and ‘incompleteness’ tend to carry negative associations).
'ideology of the aesthetic'. According to Eagleton, the emergent middle class, wishing to define itself as the universal subject of history without sacrificing the sense of particularity that is part of its individualistic ideology, finds in the aesthetic a 'dream of reconciliation'. Here is a sphere in which individuals are to be 'woven into intimate unity with no detriment to their specificity' whilst the 'abstract totality' of art is 'suffused with all the flesh-and-blood reality of individual being'. The aesthetics of openness and fragmentation that Bakhtin and Benjamin embrace are not to be domesticated into a dream of easy resolution.

1. Allegory and Dialogue

Here, I turn to Benjamin's Habilitationsschrift, written 1924-25, On the Origin of the German Play of Lamentation. This work is not just a contribution to the literary history of the German Baroque. Benjamin's Trauerspiel book keeps an eye on its own present and is, in significant measure, a justification of the aesthetics of the Avant-garde. The allegorical mode of thinking which Benjamin sees at work in Trauerspiel is to recur in his analysis of commodity form and of modernist figures such as Baudelaire and Brecht. The Trauerspiel text, hence, represents a crucial moment in Benjamin's thought, insofar as it conjoins the early language mysticism of 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' (a text that is drawn on substantially and, indeed, in part, reproduced in the Trauerspiel book) with his later work which is committed to the aesthetics and politics of the Avant-garde.

12 Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic, p. 25.
14 The German title is Über den Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels. It has been translated by John Osborne as The Origin of German Tragic Drama. 'Trauerspiel', however, is best translated as 'play of lamentation'. For convenience I shall continue to refer to it as the Trauerspiel book. Whilst it failed to win Benjamin a university position, the Trauerspiel study came out as a book in 1928.
15 Gilloch comments: '[Benjamin's] interest in the Trauerspiel, in particular, was sparked by the recognition that the bleak, broken world of the baroque might have a special significance for, an "elective affinity" with his own time, convulsed as it was by the carnage of the Great War, the financial turmoil and inflation of the Weimar years, and a sense of cultural crisis.' Gilloch, Benjamin, p. 237.
16 The Trauerspiel book also forms a bridge between Benjamin's theologically oriented writings and his Marxist writings, since a formative influence on the writing of the book was his discovery of Lukács's History and Class Consciousness. Benjamin spent the summer of 1924 on Capri, writing the bulk of the Trauerspiel book, and it was here that he also read History and Class Consciousness. Lukács's work was to provide Benjamin with a theoretical armature for the
The first section of the work, ‘Trauerspiel and Tragedy’, sets out to establish the autonomy of the Baroque tragic drama in the face of the tyranny of classical models. According to Benjamin, Ancient Greek tragedy must not be seen as a universal, transhistorical genre; on the contrary, tragedy arises from a specific historical moment: humanity’s struggle against myth, as exemplified by the tragic hero who battles the forces of Fate in order to assert his or her ethical autonomy. Trauerspiel had traditionally been viewed by scholars as a degenerate form of tragedy. Benjamin insists, however, that Trauerspiel also corresponds to its own, completely distinct historical moment and must not be judged by the terms of tragedy. What organizes Trauerspiel is not the conflict of the tragic hero, but history, understood by the Baroque sensibility in terms of the inescapable transience and fragmentation of worldly things that finds its expression in lamentation. Far from seeing it as a degenerate and fragmented form of tragedy, Benjamin reads an internal, formal coherence into Trauerspiel which is provided by its very fragmentation.17

Benjamin’s choice and definition of Trauerspiel as subject matter bears comparison with Bakhtin’s approach to the polyphonic novel and to Dostoevsky’s work in particular. In the opening chapter of the Dostoevsky book Bakhtin reviews the work of Dostoevsky’s critics who stress the contradictory, heterogeneous, plural, fragmentary and unresolved nature of Dostoevsky’s world. Bakhtin quotes Komarich, for example:

Snatching [...] chunks of reality, extending empiricism to its utmost extreme, Dostoevsky does not for a single moment permit us to lose ourselves in joyous recognition of that reality (as Flaubert does, or Leo Tolstoy); instead he frightens us, and this is precisely because he snatches and rips everything out of the normal and predictable chain of the real; in transferring these chunks to himself, Dostoevsky does not transfer along with them the predictable links familiar to us from

17 As Leslie points out: ‘Benjamin was frequently able to employ the concept of decline (Verfall) positively, and to perceive in decay historical truth.’ Leslie, Benjamin, p. 43. This goes as much for the supposedly degenerate era of the Weimar Republic as for the supposedly degenerate form of Trauerspiel.
our experience: the Dostoevskian novel is bound up in an organic unity that has nothing to do with plot. (DP 20)

One notes here the attributes of montage, shock and renewal of the familiar – integral aspects of Benjamin's aesthetics – which occur in Komarich's characterization of Dostoevsky's art. Bakhtin's comments reinforce a sense of these characteristics:

Indeed, the monologic unity of the world is destroyed in a Dostoevskian novel, but those ripped-off pieces of reality are in no sense directly combined in the unity of the novel: each of these pieces gravitates toward the integral field of vision of a specific character; each makes sense only at the level of a specific consciousness. If these chunks of reality, deprived of any pragmatic links, were combined directly as things emotionally, lyrically or symbolically harmonious in the unity of a single and monologic field of vision, then before us would be the world of the Romantic, the world of Hoffmann, for example, but in no way could it be the world of Dostoevsky. (DP 20-21)

Bakhtin asserts here the impossibility of judging Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel by the standards of the totalizing forms of the realist novel or Romanticism. Dostoevsky's novel of chunks and ripped-off pieces of reality must be judged in its own terms. As in Benjamin's approach to Trauerspiel, Bakhtin sets himself the task of seeing an internal coherence to Dostoevsky's work that emerges from its very lack of coherence. Both thinkers refuse to see the fragmented form only in the light of the tyranny of totalization.

The second section of Benjamin's Trauerspiel book is devoted to allegory. Benjamin approaches this through an immanent critique of the Romantics' characterization of the relationship between symbol and allegory. For the Romantics, the orthodox conception of the symbol was 'the appearance of the Idea in the artwork' (im Kunstwerk die Erscheinung einer Idee) (GS I 336; OGTD 160). The term 'Idea' here carries the full Idealist sense of a transcendent, absolute, and timeless value. Appearance implies that the idea does not merely occur in a work of art, which serves as an incidental vehicle, but shines forth in and through the work, lending it beauty and totality. Through the symbol, works of art entail a claim to totality, to an unmediated communion with the absolute in
and of themselves: ‘as a symbolic construct, the beautiful is supposed to merge with the divine in an unbroken whole’ (GS I 336; OGTD 160).

Benjamin objects to the notion of the aesthetic symbol because of a conviction that the doctrine of the symbol implies a falsification of human, historical experience. For Benjamin, the philosophy of art since Romanticism has suffered under ‘the tyranny of a usurper’ in the form of the Romantic symbol (GS I 336; OGTD 159). The symbol, Benjamin argues, falsifies. In a deconstructive play on the terms that ground the Romantic doctrine of the symbol, Benjamin’s critique reveals the semantic richness and resultant ambiguity of Romantic theory.

The symbol is said to transfigure (verklären) its object. As McCole puts it:

Verklärung suggests first of all a transformation in which an object takes on a certain radiance. The object glows; it beams, like a face transfigured by bliss, or shines, as does the beautiful appearance (schöner Schein) of the work of art. Transfiguration often involves an exaltation into the transcendent [...]. But finally, Verklärung may also mean an idealization of something in the negative sense of distortion or even falsification [...]. The aesthetic symbol’s transgression, in a word, is Verklärung, a falsifying transfiguration.18

At the heart of this is the double meaning of the word, Schein. Schein, like the English ‘appearance’, carries two meanings: on the one hand, it means appearance, in the sense of actual manifestation; on the other hand, it means appearance in the sense of illusion. The symbol’s insistence on the Schein of the transcendent transfixes men and women with its seductive glow and blinds them to the transient reality of their profane existence. Benjamin here objects to a false or premature projection of totality.

For the Romantics, the arbitrary and conventional nature of allegorical expression was a testament to its degeneracy. These critics denigrated allegory in their keenness to exalt the aesthetic symbol. Schopenhauer, for instance, contends that allegory was, like script, a mere conventional relationship between a signifying image and its meaning. Reading the Romantic critics against themselves, however, Benjamin contends that allegory is indeed like script and

bears the marks of its origin in convention; yet this, he argues, is its distinctive strength. Allegory, like script, ‘immerses itself in the abyss between pictorial being and meaning’ (GS I 342; OGTD 165). In so doing, it probes the inevitable discrepancy between arbitrary signs and absolute, stabilized significance.

Allegorical expression bears witness to the failure of human language and signification to capture and stabilize that which is intended. Allegory flaunts its own fragmentation and asserts the fundamentally unsuccessful and fragmented nature of human existence. As opposed to the symbol’s image of harmonious totality, allegorical expression transforms all it touches into fragments and ruins:

Whereas romanticism inspired by its belief in the infinite, intensified the perfected creation of form and idea in critical terms, at one stroke the profound vision of allegory transforms things and works into stirring writing. [...] In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished. (GS I 352; OGTD 176)

An allegorical mode of thinking, then, acts as a critical and deconstructive weapon against the false totalizing of the symbolic mode.

By virtue of its unmediated access to the transcendent, the symbol lays claim to absolute stability and immunity to history. For Benjamin:

The temporal measure of symbolic experience is the mystical instant (the nunc stans). [...] Whilst in the symbol with the transfiguration of decay the transfigured countenance of nature reveals itself fleetingly in the light of salvation, in allegory the death-mask of history lies before the observer as a frozen landscape. History in all that is untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful from the beginning of time expresses itself in this countenance - no, in this death’s head. (GS I 342-43; OGTD 166-67)

Where the symbol embodies momentary totality with the absolute, allegory has the discontinuous and fragmented structure of a series of moments, of transitory,

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19 This is one of the many aspects in Benjamin’s work that has drawn the attention of thinkers of deconstruction. Certainly Benjamin’s theory of the primacy of script is similar to that of Derrida in Of Grammatology: ‘there is nothing subordinate about written script; it is not cast away in reading, like dross. It is absorbed along with what is read as its “pattern”’ (GS I 388; OGTD 215). Likewise, the effect of script-based allegory on the symbol might well be described as deconstructive of a metaphysics of presence. Eagleton’s reading of allegory runs along these lines. See Eagleton, Benjamin, especially pp. 20-23.
failed attempts to capture meaning. It follows from this that allegory, which is rooted in the profane course of human history, has access to a facet of experience inaccessible to the symbol: the experience of all that is untimely, sorrowful and unsuccessful; the mournful transience of the play of lamentation is also the transience of our unfulfilled, profane existence.

In the symbol, sign and meaning are unmediated. There is, in the symbol, an indivisible unity of form and content, even if this unity represents a falsified image of the world. In contrast, allegory is characterized by a conventional and arbitrary relationship between sign and meaning which is semiotic in character.\textsuperscript{20} It is this semiotic character of allegory that allows for a reconstituted, open-ended relationship between the sacred and the profane that recognizes the unbridgeable gap between the two realms, yet calls all the more painfully for its abolition. Benjamin writes:

\begin{quote}
Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the world in which the detail is of no great importance. But it will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone who is familiar with allegorical textual exegesis, that all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued. (\textit{GS} I 351; \textit{OGTD} 175)
\end{quote}

The arbitrary nature of allegory means that it continually fails to capture its object. In this failure lies a truthful, but negative relation between the transient world of the profane and the eternal realm of the sacred. If allegory rips the totality of the symbol out of the illusory site of transparent meaning, and thereby destroys the false experience of the world which the symbol contains, it goes on to create a new relation to the object, preserving something of the relation to a world beyond that the symbol claimed to represent.

\textsuperscript{20} In the terms of ‘Of Language as Such and of the Language of Man’, symbol corresponds to name, allegory to fallen sign. What we see in the \textit{Trauerspiel} book is Benjamin’s reevaluation of the opposition of name and sign through his discovery of new potentialities in the debased nature of the sign.
By refusing to present the false reconciliation of the symbol, allegory projects a higher, transgressant perspective from which this world can be judged and justified. In so doing, it contains within its world of mournful fragments of history a negated image of a higher, ahistorical totality. An analogous notion can be observed many years later in Benjamin’s analysis of Baudelaire:

If Baudelaire, in the ‘Spleen’ and in ‘Vie antérieure’ holds in his hands the scattered fragments [auseinandergesprengten Bestandsstücke] of genuine historical experience, Bergson has alienated himself from history much more with his notion of the durée [...]. It [the durée] is the quintessence of an Erlebnis that parades in the borrowed robe of Erfahrung. The spleen in contrast, exhibits the Erlebnis in all its nakedness [stellt das Erlebnis in seiner Blöße aus] (GS I 643; SW 336).

Unlike Bergson’s vitalism, Baudelaire’s poetry of the fragments of urban experience (Erlebnis) refuses false totalizing. The result is that his poetry creates a negative relation to the experience (Erfahrung), the disintegration of which his verse demonstrates so clearly:

Of all the experiences which made his life what it was, Baudelaire singled out his having been jostled by the crowd as the decisive, unmistakable experience. [...] Baudelaire battled the crowd – with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wind. This is the nature of the immediate experience (Erlebnis) to which Baudelaire has given the weight of long experience (Erfahrung). (GS I 652-53; SW 343)

It is in the most debased and fragmented of phenomena (the shock experience [Chokerlebnis] of urban life) that a negative image of totality that bears the weight of Erfahrung may come into being.

Bakhtin shares with Benjamin a fear of false totalization. Just as Benjamin contends that the symbol lays claim to an untimely confidence in the totality of

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21 As Andrew Benjamin and Osborne comment: ‘in The Origin of German Tragic Drama, allegory is seen to destroy the deceptive totality of the symbol, wrenching it out of context and placing it in new, transparently constructed, configurations of meaning’. Benjamin and Osborne, ‘Introduction’, p. xi.

22 As Nägele comments: ‘Erfahrung is laid bare as Erlebnis. Yet it is the gesture of laying bare the Erlebnis without any borrowed robe of Erfahrung that gives the Erlebnis the weight of Erfahrung.’ Rainer Nägele, ‘The poetic ground laid bare (Benjamin reading Baudelaire)’, in Ferris (ed.), Benjamin: Theoretical Questions, pp. 118-38 (138).
transcendence, so Bakhtin finds and condemns a pretence of and confidence in its own finality and self-sufficiency in monologue:

Monologism denies that there exists outside of it another consciousness, with the same rights, and capable of responding on an equal footing, another and equal I (thou). For a monologic outlook (in its extreme form) the other remains entirely and only an object of consciousness, and cannot constitute another consciousness. No response capable of altering everything in the world of my consciousness, is expected of this other. The monologue is accomplished and deaf to the other’s response; it does not await it and does not grant it any decisive force. Monologue makes do without the other; that is why to some extent it objectivizes all reality. Monologue pretends to be the last word. (DP 292-93)

Monologue shares, then, a number of characteristics with the symbol: its imperviousness corresponds to the imperviousness of the untouchable symbol; its claim to finality and direct signification corresponds to the symbol’s claim to eternal value. Monologue, like the symbol, presents itself as being outside the course of history, hence it represents a falsification of human experience. Furthermore, it is worth considering Benjamin’s description of the rule of the symbol as the ‘tyranny of a usurper’ in relation to Bakhtin. Hirschkop comments of monologue:

In fact poetic discourse and all the variants that it spawns in the course of ‘Discourse in the Novel’ (different species of monologism, ‘serious’ discourse, authoritarian discourse, myth) are worth polemicking with precisely because they represent a kind of false, official transcendence of the individual, a transcendence which offers power as a substitute for fulfilment and redemption. 23

Hirschkop is right to emphasize the connection between monologue’s false transcendence and power. The ‘tyranny of a usurper’ neatly sums up Bakhtin’s sense of the twin threats that are posed by the violence and self-appointed authority of the monologic utterance. 24 Monologue, in its claim to the final word, like the symbol in its claim to transcendence, pretends to a position of power. In so doing, both phenomena pretend to a throne that is not theirs.

23 Hirschkop, Bakhtin, p. 87.
24 Benjamin’s phrase, ‘the tyranny of a usurper’, is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s conception of the ‘pretender’, already referred to.
Just as Benjamin favours the failed and permanently deferred mode of allegorical representation, so Bakhtin favours the ever-provisional and open form of dialogic discourse. Once again, dialogue shares many of the characteristics of allegory. Dialogue, like allegory, bears the imprint of its own failure. In its expectation of an answer back, dialogue recognizes its inherent instability and incapacity for absolute signification. Dialogue is thoroughly historical, immersed in the concrete language of social reality. With the development of dialogic discourse, ‘for the first time in artistic-ideological consciousness, time and the world become historical’. (DI 30). The essence of dialogue is indirect discourse, a word directed at the other’s word. Allegory, too, whose signifier must always refer to other signifiers and not to the concrete being of the signified, is a word with a sideways glance. The dialogic word is polyvalent since its meaning is contested and it is subject to competing evaluations, like allegory whose conventional and arbitrary nature opens it up to plural meanings and plural accents.

Like allegory, moreover, dialogue possesses a double orientation. First, it possesses a critical function in relation to the pretence of totalizing monologue; second, by virtue of this function, it retains a negative relation to the totality to which monologue lays claim. Both these aspects are present in the following observations on dialogic discourse in the Dostoevsky book:

We might add that Rabelais taunts the deceptive human word by a parodic destruction of syntactic structures, thereby reducing to absurdity some of the logical and expressively accented aspects of words. [...] Turning away from language (by means of language of course), discrediting any direct or unmediated intentionality and expressive excess (any “weighty” seriousness) that might adhere in ideological discourse, presuming that all language is conventional and false, maliciously inadequate to reality – all this achieves in Rabelais the maximum purity possible in prose. But the truth that might oppose such falsity receives almost no direct intentional and verbal expression in Rabelais, it does not receive its own word – it reverberates only in the parodic unmasking accents in which the lie is present. Truth is restored by reducing the lie to an absurdity, but truth itself does not seek words; she is afraid to entangle herself in the word, to soil herself in verbal pathos. (DI 307)
On the one hand, the dialogic discourse of Rabelais acts deconstructively on monologic claims to an unmediated form of signification: in Bakhtin’s view, the parodic laughter exposes the conventional and arbitrary nature of monologic seriousness for what it is, and, hence, such laughter is able to dethrone the pretender. On the other hand, this movement of deconstruction restores – albeit negatively – a relation to truth. Truth here does not speak her name (once again, we see Bakhtin’s recourse to silence) but is nevertheless restored to her throne.

2. Theology and Politics

Benjamin’s allegorical mode of thinking structures his work. It is at the heart of his conception of theology, rooted in Jewish conceptions of the incommensurability of the realm of the sacred and the profane, the unutterability of God’s name and the prohibition of graven images.25 In the apocalyptic strand of this tradition, the more catastrophic and the more negative the nature of historical life, the more forceful the testament to the need for and imminence of the abolition of historical life which will be brought about by the Messiah.26 Benjamin displays a strong affinity with this tradition. In the ‘Theological-Political Fragment’ (written either 1920-21 or 1937-38), he writes:

Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing that is historical can relate, from its own ground, to anything Messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be established as a goal. From the standpoint of history, it is not the goal but the terminus [Ende]. (GS II 203; SW III 305)

The historical and messianic realms are discrete. The Messiah is not the telos, that is to say the fulfilment and coming-into-fruition of tendencies immanent to

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25 Meschonnic charts this tradition and the utopian images that it contains in biblical texts, medieval Cabalistic literature, as well as in twentieth-century thinkers such as Rosenzweig, Levinas, and Benjamin, to whom the last third of his book is dedicated. Meschonnic also points to the connection between Jewish negative theology and the apophatic tradition which, critics have argued, is influential in Orthodoxy and thus on Bakhtin. See Henri Meschonnic, L’Utopie du Juif, Paris, 2001, particularly, on negative theology, pp. 189-227.

history. Rather the completion and perfection (*Vollendung*) and redemption of history consists in its destruction. And yet, in Benjamin's allegorical mode of thought, the very debased nature of the profane in all its transience carries an index to the Messianic.

The profane, therefore, though not itself a category of [the Messianic Kingdom], is a decisive category of its most unobtrusive approach. For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall [*Untergang*], and only in happiness is its downfall destined to find it. [...] For nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away [*Vergängnis*]. To strive for such a passing away – even the passing away of those stages of man that are nature – is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism. (*GS II* 203-04; *SW III* 305, translation modified)

It follows from this that the task of the writer and the critic is not to attempt to construct visions of a better world of transcendence, for this is impossible and ultimately mythic. Rather, he is to reveal the broken nature of the world of history and transience in anticipation of the word of God that will come as abolition or, as we shall see, in anticipation of the voice of revolution that will come as destruction.

In his essay on Karl Kraus (1931), Benjamin quotes one of Kraus's poems from 1929, which is an attack directed at Stefan George. Here, Kraus confronts George, the 'object of worship':

> Who in the temple dwells from which
> He never had to drive the traders and the lenders,
> Nor yet the Pharisees and scribes
> Who, therefore, camped about the place, describe it.

(*GS II* 359; *SW II* 451)

In Kraus's polemical poem and in Benjamin's reading of it, George's error is twofold: first, George's hieratic 'cult of language' lays claim to the language that can describe the temple. His poetic mystifications are, as Britt puts it, 'a kind of linguistic idolatry'. Second, George occupies the space of the temple. In opposition to the Messiah who comes and clears the holy place of the money-lenders and traders, George's blasphemous claim to occupy the holy space presents an obstacle to Messianic happening.

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The words that prepare the way of the Messiah must not be prematurely full of the mere appearance of the divine, but empty and emptying. Such are the words of allegorical form. In their arbitrary emptiness they make space for the authentic, full word of the Messiah. This is the significance of Kraus and his liberation of language through destruction. Kraus is one of the incarnations of Benjamin’s destructive character. In the wilderness of fallen language, Kraus cries ‘make way for the Lord!’ For it is in the space that has been cleared away that the Messiah can come and speak. Breithaupt comments:

[The destructive character] makes space […] only because it was thought to be occupied by some phenomenon or fiction. When this fiction is emptied out, the space remains. In this space, the future is not blocked. Someone or something could arrive. Benjamin says: “There will be someone who might need this place without occupying it.” The empty space is the podium for possible speakers. For Benjamin, this empty space is the only sphere for politics, a politics of advent. Benjamin does not make an image of this person who might come and need this space. Every image or phenomenon would only occupy the space and thereby block the future. Sometimes, Benjamin calls this coming and space-needing person the Messiah.

Just as at the Passover Seder a cup of wine is poured for the prophet Elijah (and indeed, as in certain extreme forms of Protestantism a space is left at table for an always-expected Christ), so the forms of language that carry an index to redemption and authentic totality are those that make space, those that, in their brokenness, are empty and emptying.

This negative, allegorical mode of thinking need not, however, operate on the theological plane alone. It is at work in Benjamin’s adherence to the dictum of Brecht (another of Benjamin’s destructive characters) that the cause of political change is best served by starting with the bad, new things, rather than with the good, old ones. It is to be found in his argument that mechanical reproduction which, on the one hand, destroys benignly auratic modes of experience, such as

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28 Fritz Breithaupt, ‘History as the Delayed Disintegration of Phenomena’, in Richter (ed.), Benjamin’s Ghosts, pp. 191-203 (199). More problematically, Breithaupt goes on to argue: ‘this Messiah can only arrive in strict imagelessness. He or She does not need to come because the empty space is the condition of possibility of his or her arrival and that is all that is needed.’ This seems to me to be a reduction of Benjamin’s serious theological and political meditations to the dimension of mere possibility for its own sake.
those, for example, inherent in storytelling, also fashions, on the other hand, a new and liberated organization of collective subjects. Such a mode of thinking, then, is at the heart of Benjamin's appropriation of revolutionary Marxism.

Benjamin's Marxism is a rejection both of the vulgar form of Marxism that sees the revolution as the natural and inevitable result of economic and technical progress, and of the view of so-called progressivists in the Social Democratic parties who conceive of the cause of social justice proceeding by step-by-step reform. Both positions project a political situation (revolution, a just position for the working classes) as the goal and fulfilment of historical tendencies. Rather Benjamin conceives the revolution as the interruption of a historical evolution which otherwise leads to catastrophe. As Benjamin puts it in a striking reworking of Marx: 'Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train - namely, the human race - to activate the emergency brake' (GS I 1232; SW IV 402). It is the sight of the catastrophe ahead on the railway line of history - the boulders that block the track - that forces the proletariat to pull the revolutionary emergency brake and bring history to an end.

It is this form of Marxism that leads Benjamin to put his faith not in Stalinist optimism but in what he terms, in the essay on Surrealism, the 'organization of pessimism':

Surrealism has come ever closer to the Communist answer. And that means pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between individuals, between nations. And unlimited mistrust only in I. G. Farben and the peaceful perfection of the air force. (GS II 308; SW II 216-17)

Benjamin's argument is that precisely in the most debased phenomena of capitalist society are to be found both an unmasking of false freedoms and a

29 As Tiedemann and others have pointed out, however, this conception of revolution as catastrophe owes perhaps more to Blanqui and anarchism than it does to Marx. See Rolf Tiedemann, 'Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses "On the Concept of History"', in Smith (ed.), Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History, pp. 175-209.
negative relation to true freedom. This view is an alternative form of Marxism that nevertheless stays close to Marx. For Marx argues that, for example, the very nature of commodity, the separation of buying and selling, which makes capitalism possible, contains the seed of the economic crises which are to bring about capitalism's downfall. Likewise, he asserts that the progressive immiseration of the proletariat, the most brutal and negative effect of advanced capitalism, is the process by which capitalism produces and increases its own gravediggers, the revolutionary proletariat. For Marx, as for Benjamin, hope is to be found in the most negative of phenomena.

In this optimistic pessimism, Benjamin moves sharply away from any tendencies in his work towards cultural conservatism. Benjamin's silence in response to Buber had been a resignation in the face of the impossibility of saying anything meaningful in a fallen, instrumentalized and alienated language. Benjamin's theological-political convictions, however, lead him beyond this position. Far from rejecting modernity in a nostalgic lamentation of all that has disappeared, Benjamin's embrace of modernity in all its degeneracy constitutes an act of theological and political responsibility. So too, in the sphere of art, Benjamin, on the one hand, turns to champion those artistic forms that reveal the nature of fallen experience, and, on the other hand, directs his destructive critical powers at those forms that seek to falsify the transience and brokenness of historical life. Revolutionary forms are those such as montage or Brecht's political theatre that interrupt and create space for political action.

In the case of Bakhtin, it is, perhaps, less clear that his celebration of open form is, in a measure equal to that of Benjamin, a provisional gesture which is predicated on the projection of some future totality. Many critics insist on Bakhtin's absolute resistance to the form of finalization that this would imply:

Dostoevsky's text is presented as a confrontation of discursive instances: an opposition of utterances, a contrapuntal, polyphonic

30 'Buying and selling can be separated. They are, then, crises in potential.' Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, quoted in Christoph Turcke and Gerhard Bolte, *Einführung in die kritische Theorie*, Darmstadt, 1994, p. 6. Turcke and Bolte provide a lucid account of the relation between commodity and crisis in Marx's thought and the influence of this aspect of his thought in Germany following the First World War.
ensemble. It does not form a totalizable structure: without unity of subject or meaning, anti-totalitarian and anti-theological, the Dostoevskian model has nothing in common with Hegelian dialectic.  

Despite the undoubted attraction of such a view with its utopian projection of a world of possibility, this conception of Bakhtin’s thought gravely impoverishes it, reducing it to a mere openness for its own sake. An emphasis on eternal openness in Bakhtin would imply that he supports a denial that one is responsible for one’s utterances, a form of alibi. Hirschkop comments: ‘Discourse is historical; it lacks theological certainty. But this does not mean that its essence is to lack any form of certainty and therefore every statement is equally, and hence absolutely, provisional.’ To claim otherwise is, in a curious fashion, to erase difference from Bakhtin’s thought. If all statements, though contradictory, retain equal rights, then their difference evaporates and the result is an eternal continuum of undecidability.

One way of approaching this problem is to turn to Bakhtin’s collaborator, Voloshinov. Voloshinov argues that utterances gain their signification in a dialogic interaction that is social and open-ended. The vision of signification is one that appears to be explicitly anti-authoritarian and democratic. No utterance is immune to a potential answer back. The dialogic nature of language itself means that evaluative meaning cannot be permanently fixed within the flux that is language. Voloshinov contrasts the closed forms of monologic utterance that seek to have the final word with the open forms of indirect discourse which remain true to the nature of language.

Voloshinov’s historical narrative is a narrative of liberation. It begins with the enslavement of the native word at the hands of the conquering foreigner and his ideology-transmitting counterpart, the priest.

[One’s native word] contains no mystery; it can become a mystery only in the mouths of others, provided they are hierarchically alien to us – in the mouth of the chief, in the mouth of priests. But in that case, it has already become a word of a different kind, externally

changed and removed from the routine of life (taboo for usage in ordinary life, or an archaism of speech); that is, if it had not already been from the start a foreign word in the mouth of a conqueror chief. [...] This grandiose organizing role of the alien word [...] led to its coalescence in the depths of historical consciousness of nations with the idea of authority, the idea of power, the idea of holiness, the idea of truth, and dictated that notions about the word be preeminently oriented toward the alien word. (MPL 75)

The word described here is closed: closed off by the hierarchical distance that I have discussed in Chapter 1. It is wrapped up in an impenetrable aura of holiness, power and unfamiliarity. It is the word of a tradition that strives to stay forever the same and seeks to organize and subordinate its community in fixed relations of power.

Voloshinov charts the unravelling of this form of monologic discourse through dialogization in the development of genres of indirect speech. This process is an opening up of the closed word of the philologist and priest into the plural world of modernity. It is a process that is characterized by the relativization of the word that results from the intrusion of varied, individual points of view. It is a process of secularization and demystification in which the hieratic speech of the priest becomes the demotic speech of the people, a process of democratization in which the authoritarian word of the single chief is wrested from his mouth for the many mouths of competing classes, a process of the opening up and dissolution of a single, immutable truth into the plural sphere of many claims to truth. It is, then, once again, the 'profaning of all that is holy', the 'disturbance of social relations', the melting of the solid into air, that we have already seen in the Communist Manifesto.

Just as in Marx, however, Voloshinov's narrative of the liberation of the word does not end here. The dialogization of monologic discourse is not to be celebrated per se but only in so far as it is a necessary precondition for a higher form of freedom:

The victory of extreme forms of the picturesque style in reported speech is not, of course, to be explained in terms either of psychological factors or the artist's own individual stylistic purposes, but is explainable in terms of the general, far-reaching subjectivization
of the ideological word-utterance. No longer is it a monument, nor even a document, of a substantive ideational position; it makes itself felt only as the expression of an adventitious state. [...] The utterance has virtually ceased to be an object for serious ideational consideration. The categorical word, the word 'from one's own mouth,' the declaratory word remains only alive in scientific writings. In all other fields of verbal-ideological creativity, what predominates is not the 'outright' but the 'contrived' word. All verbal activity in these cases amounts to piecing together 'other persons' words' and 'words seemingly from other persons.' [...] All this bespeaks an alarming instability of the ideological word. (MPL 158-59)

Here we see the other face of the liberation of modernity: instability, insincerity, inauthenticity, anxiety, a crippling of the faculties of expression, an 'adventitious state' of flux. Voloshinov's emphasis on dialogue and unfinalizability is, then, merely a precondition of and clearing of the ground for the categorical and final utterance of proletarian revolution. His use of a quotation from Lorck makes this clear. 'There is only one possibility for [language's] rejuvenation: the proletariat must take over command of the word from the bourgeoisie' (MPL 154). In Voloshinov's view, dialogue is the precondition of the silencing of all dialogue by the authoritative word of revolution; open form is the precondition of a future completion.33

In Voloshinov's philosophy of language, a form of negative politics is at work. Voloshinov does not himself explicitly call for the proletariat to come to voice, but leaves this to his quotation. Similarly, his concentration is on the provisional, if liberating, form of dialogization, not on the forms that will be taken by the authoritative word of the proletariat. Despite the fact that he is writing twelve years after the October Revolution, he seems not to allow himself to speculate about a future that ought to be so close at hand. Perhaps he stands in

33 It is in this context that we can understand statements such as the one that Voloshinov makes about Freud. In his essay on Freudism, Voloshinov argues that the unconscious is simply the unofficial conscious, that which bourgeois society cannot accept. He goes on to assert: 'In a healthy social body, just as in a socially healthy individual, everyday ideology, established on the socio-economic basis, is coherent and solid, without any divergence between the official and unofficial consciousnesses.' Valentin Voloshinov, 'Freidism: Kriticheskii ocherk' (Freudism: a critical sketch) [1927], in Filosofiia i sotsiologia gumanitarnykh nauk, ed. by D. A. Iunov, St Petersburg, 1995, pp. 87-189 (167). This statement seems to concord with some of the most extreme Stalinist positions on the need for an absolute lack of divergence between the private and the public.
accord with Hegel, for whom 'the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk';\textsuperscript{34} perhaps he also stands in accord with Trotsky. For Trotsky, writing in 1923:

There is no revolutionary art as yet. There are the elements of this art, there are hints and attempts at it [...]. Revolutionary art which inevitably reflects all the contradictions of a revolutionary social system, should not be confused with Socialist art for which no basis has as yet been made. [...]. Not for nothing did Engels speak of the Revolution as a leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. The revolution itself is not as yet the kingdom of freedom. On the contrary, it is developing the features of necessity to the greatest degree. Socialism will abolish class antagonisms, as well as classes, but the Revolution carries the class struggle to its highest tension. [...] Revolutionary literature cannot but be imbued with a spirit of hatred, which is a creative historical factor in an epoch of proletarian dictatorship. Under Socialism, solidarity will be the basis of society. Literature and art will be tuned to a different key.\textsuperscript{35}

The signs of freedom are to found in the development of their opposites: the realm of freedom is prefigured by the intensification of necessity and the establishment of dictatorship; classlessness is prefigured by the intensification of class struggle; solidarity is prefigured by the intensification of hatred. Just as Trotsky predicts that culture will be 'tuned to a different key' and yet does not claim to be able to sing in it, and just as he sees signs of solidarity in the development of hatred, so Voloshinov sees in the decadent, open forms of indirect speech the signs of a future final word. Other critics, such as Emerson and Morson, have made similar points about Voloshinov's thought:

Whereas Bakhtin celebrates intense dialogization and double-voicing, Voloshinov, writing as a Marxist, describes such phenomena disapprovingly. The forms so central to Bakhtin's ideas of unfinalizability and so characteristic of his prosaic approach to the cultural world are regarded by Voloshinov as symptoms of decadent "relativistic individualism". Voloshinov expects and calls for the decay, if not the abolition, of these forms of speech, and he believes that the triumph of the working class is the death knell of these forms.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34} Hegel, \textit{Philosophy of Right}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{36} Morson and Emerson, \textit{Bakhtin}, p. 124-25.
Nevertheless, it is possible to see a compatibility rather than divergence between Bakhtin and Voloshinov. It is possible to discern a similar notion of open form as the necessary precondition of a future completion that, however, operates within the context of a different narrative, and hence according to a radically different temporal model. Where the future, final word, in Voloshinov’s account, is to resound within history as the utterance of the victorious proletariat, one can speculate that in Bakhtin’s thought the future, final word is to come from without history as the word of God.

Here is not the place to reconstruct in great detail the fate of the conception of God and his relation to his world throughout Bakhtin’s career. This has, in any event, already been undertaken by Coates in her book. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue, more or less in accordance with Coates, that the overall shape of Bakhtin’s thought may be conceived of as follows: in the early work (Toward a Philosophy of the Act, ‘Author and Hero’), the author exists as a figure who, from a position of outsidedness, lovingly bestows form upon the hero as an act of benign consummation. Subsequently, however, beginning with the Dostoevsky book and culminating most radically in the essays on the novel, Bakhtin adopts an aesthetic of radical openness. Here, the author gives up his privileged position outside the world of his heroes and descends onto their plane as an equal participant in the dialogue of the novel:

The new artistic position of the author with regard to the hero in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel is a fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position, one that affirms the internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero. For the author the hero is not “he” and not “I” but a fully valid “thou”, that is, another and autonomous “I” (thou art) [...] And this “great dialogue” of the novel [...] is no stenographer’s report of a finished dialogue, from which the author has already withdrawn and over which he is located as if in some higher decision-making position: that would have turned an authentic and unfinished dialogue into an objectivized and finalized image of dialogue, of the sort usual for every monologic novel. (DP 63)

Now, the gift that the author grants his heroes is not the gift of finalization but the gift of the sacrifice of her or his being as a higher principle. Through this gift, her or his heroes are set free.
Critics such as Coates have usefully pointed out the similarity of Bakhtin’s thought here with the Christian theological doctrine of kenosis. This doctrine is expressed in the Christ-hymn cited by Paul in Philippians:

[Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus] who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself [alla heauton ekenosen], taking the form of a slave [morphhn doulou labwn], being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2, 6-11)

In the incarnation, the word gives up its equality with God; it empties itself of its divine plenitude. This abasement in kenosis, however, is merely the precondition for Christ’s rising again to higher glory. Similarly, the abasement and emptying of the word (as, for example, in Benjamin’s conception of allegory), its temporary enslavement in earthly conditions, is the precondition for its exaltation in an eternal song of praise.

Kenosis in Bakhtin is a concept that stands in a relation of analogy to Benjamin’s negative theology of destruction. In the following passage from the Dostoevsky book, it is possible to see Bakhtin struggling to express the apparent paradox of kenosis in relation to the author of the polyphonic novel:

This interaction [of several consciousnesses in the polyphonic novel] provides no support for the viewer who would objectify an entire event according to some ordinary monologic category [...] – and this consequently makes the viewer also a participant. Not only does the novel give no firm support outside the rupture-prone world of dialogue for a third, monologically all-encompassing consciousness – but on the contrary, everything in the novel is structured to make dialogic opposition inescapable. Not a single element of the work is structured from the point of view of a nonparticipating “third person.” In the novel itself, nonparticipating “third persons” are not represented in any way. There is no place for them, compositionally or in the

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37 Coates suggests that it is the ‘quintessentially Russian concept of kenotic self-humiliation and self-giving love’ which inspired Bakhtin. Ruth Coates, ‘The First and Second Adam in Bakhtin’s Thought’, in Felch and Contino (eds), Religion in Bakhtin, pp. 63-78 (77).
larger meaning of the work. And this is not a weakness of the author but his greatest strength. By this means a new authorial position is won and conquered, one located above the monologic position. (DP 18)

The polyphonic novel is a negation of the closed world of the monologic novel. The author has given up his position above the world of the novel as a third, allcompassing consciousness. This is a negation of the closed, monologic form. The monologic author is all-encompassing and leaves no space unoccupied; he is like Kraus's image of George: the poet who occupies the temple. By contrast, like Benjamin's destructive character, the polyphonic author clears space for a future and higher intervention. Thus, in a kenotic vein, the apparent weakness expressed in the author's abdication of his authority constitutes his greatest strength: for this abdication of the authorial outsidedness clears space for a higher-level authorial position that is not presently occupied but can be occupied in the future.\(^{38}\)

Bakhtin develops a spatial metaphor predicated on definite temporal relations in a fashion remarkably similar to that of Benjamin. Like Benjamin, Bakhtin's conception of open form is of a form that makes space for future completion. The spatial metaphor that Bakhtin develops is expressed most clearly in the image of the threshold: 'The great dialogue in Dostoevsky is organized as an unclosed whole of life itself, life poised on the threshold' (DP 64). Open form leaves a door ajar through which consummating intervention may come from the outside. Bakhtin remarks in his notes made in 1961 towards a revision of the Dostoevsky book: 'The threshold, the door, the stairway. The chronotopic significance. The possibility of transforming hell into a paradise in a single instant (that is, passing from one to the other, cf. "the mysterious visitor")' (DP 299). The 'mysterious visitor' in this fragment is a reference to a figure in The Brothers Karamazov. Reminiscing about his youth on his deathbed, the starets Zosima tells how he was visited unexpectedly at night by a strange gentleman. ('There I was, sitting at home the next evening, when all of a sudden the door

\(^{38}\) Interpreting this passage in terms of different temporalities seems to be the only way to understand what is otherwise an incoherent conception of a 'new, higher authorial position', located above the monologic author's position.
opened and this very same gentleman entered.' After a series of such visits, the mysterious visitor confesses to the murder, many years before, of a woman with whom he had fallen unrequitedly in love, a murder of which he was never suspected. It is the act of opening himself in confession – above all, to his fellow human beings – that can transform the hell of guilt into paradise. In the words of the mysterious visitor:

‘Paradise’, he said, ‘is concealed within each one of us, it is hidden in me too at this very moment, and I need only to wish it, and it will come about the very next day and remain with me the rest of my life. [...] In order to refashion the world, it is necessary for people themselves to adopt a different mental attitude. [...] You ask when this will come about. It will come about, but first there must be an end to the habit of self-imposed isolation of man.’

Paradise, understood here as the radical refashioning of the world, is dependent on the ending of the closedness of isolation, on the unblocking of passing points, on the leaving clear of thresholds, on the possibility that doors may be opened from outside. Such intervention from outside might, as Bakhtin suggests in the Dostoevsky book, take the form of a Christ who is to bring about the end of dialogue itself in an act of consummation and subjugation:

What unfolds before Dostoevsky [...] is a world of consciousnesses mutually illuminating one another [...]. Among them Dostoevsky seeks the highest and most authoritative orientation, and he perceives it not as his own true thought, but as another authentic human being and his discourse. The image of the ideal human being or the image of Christ represents for him the resolution of ideological quests. This image or this highest voice must crown the world of voices, must organize and subdue it. (DP 97)

This end to dialogue, as Bakhtin implies in the notes towards a revision, may, as in Benjamin’s conception of messianic happening, come as catastrophe:

The problem of catastrophe. Catastrophe is not finalization. It is the culmination, in collision and struggle, of points of view (of equally privileged consciousnesses, each with its own world). Catastrophe does not give these points of view resolution, but on the contrary reveals their incapacity of resolution under earthly conditions; catastrophe sweeps them all away without having resolved them. Catastrophe is the opposite of triumph and apotheosis. By its very essence it is denied even elements of catharsis. (DP 298)

40 Dostoevsky, The Karamazov Brothers, p. 379.
This is the catastrophe that clears away the ground and makes space for a resolution that is not earthly in its origin.

The theological metaphor that underlies Bakhtin’s philosophy of the novel consists in positing a negative relation between the fallen world, a world that is provisional and open, and the world of salvation, a world of completion. It follows then, that, as Hirschkop comments, ‘the double-voicedness of language, its three-dimensionality, is therefore not the cue for some generalized scepticism about all ideology, but the mark of the “future, lodged in the negated present”’. The openness of dialogue is not a telos in itself, rather it is the precondition for a truly just final word. Thus, Bakhtin’s theory of the polyphonic novel retains negative traces of his early work’s emphasis on completion. The polyphonic author is aware that his form-giving word is not the final word, and hence, according to Bakhtin, he gives to its hero a space: what Bakhtin terms a ‘loophole’. As Coates comments:

> It should again be stressed that as far as human or authorial finalisation is concerned, Bakhtin is its resolved opponent after “Author and Hero”. However, he clearly reserves a space, his “loophole” as it were, for surrender to the loving authority of an absolute Other, a peculiarly spiritual, and radical, solution, to an otherwise apparently hopeless existential situation.

This is Bakhtin’s messianism, a messianism that stands close to that of Benjamin. Both consist in the ability to see signs of future completion and wholeness in the midst of an incomplete and fragmented world.

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41 Just as Benjamin’s thought bears a relation to the Jewish tradition of negative theology, so Bakhtin’s thought bears a relation to the Christian tradition of apophasis. See Poole, ‘The Apophatic Bakhtin’.

42 Hirschkop, Bakhtin, p. 95.

43 As Tihanov comments: ‘true dialogue should be resolved, at the end of the day, into a monologue. The task of dialogue is to enact a cathartic deliverance from the plurality of voices besetting the inner world of the characters.’ Tihanov, Master and Slave, p. 199-200.

44 Coates, Christianity in Bakhtin, p. 123.

45 Brandist posits a genealogy of messianic motifs in Bakhtin’s thought that suggests a direct connection to the messianic tradition in which Benjamin stands: ‘In 1961, the endlessly deferred judgement of the author is linked to the idea of a final judgement as a structural requirement of any utterance. The ultimate, “loophole” judge is cast as the superaddressee, “the absolutely just responsive understanding of whom is presupposed either at a metaphysical distance or in distant historical time.” This might take the form of “God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so on”. Since the world is nothing but the
The Temporal Orientation of Artistic Form

For all that aesthetic activity might preserve the integrity of the life upon which it bestows form, a transformation also occurs. This dialectical transformation acts – perhaps most fundamentally – upon the temporal structure of the material of life. This second section of the chapter will examine the nature of this transformation.

Aristotle, in the *Eudemean Ethics*, notes the importance of *stasis* in the work of art – the cessation of happening and the arrest of attention that occur as the artist points to all the things that are happening at one particular moment.46 *Stasis* may be understood as follows: this moment that becomes artistic material is lifted out of the flow of time of which it was a part. In this process, it is preserved; dignity is conferred upon it. It is not merely an arbitrary point of passing from one moment to another but a coherent constellation of competing forces and possibilities in its own right.47 Such is, for example, the moment of decision which the tragic hero enacts on stage. Time, here, stands still, as the hero grapples with all the possible paths of action that seem to be available to him and which present themselves to him as alternative futures. Through *stasis*, art has in its power the ability of rescuing the lived moment in its fullness from the indifferent passing of time which otherwise reduces the lived moment to an insignificant and empty instant of its own flow.

We have seen already in Chapter 2 Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s emphasis on remembrance and the transformation of the structure of time that remembrance systematic and cumulative but perpetually unfinished totality of all representations, the judgement of the world (Weltgericht) associated with the “superaddressee” is actually a type of messianism that derives, at least in part, from the Judaic elements of Marburg neo-Kantianism.’ Craig Brandist, ‘Law and the Genres of Discourse: the Bakhtin Circle’s Theory of Language and the Phenomenology of Right’, in Bostad, Brandist, Evensen and Faber (eds), *Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language and Culture*, pp. 23-45 (39).


47 The interpretation of *stasis* in terms of struggle and conflict is supported by the term’s use in classical Greece. In the Greek world, *stasis* comes to mean conflict and is the term that Thucydides uses to describe, for example, the civil strife in Corcyra. See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, ed. by M. I. Finley, trans. by Rex Warner, London, 1972, pp. 236-45. Returning to a point that I have made in my Introduction: according to Thucydides, stasis, in political terms, is the violent result of the extreme dislocation of *phusis* and *nomos*. 
enacts. In Bakhtin's 'Author and Hero', totalizing aesthetic experience adopts the structure of memory and commemoration. Aesthetic activity, as *stasis*, does not pass over the moment indifferently but rather is able to 'slow down and linger over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute (*TPA 64*)'. In so doing, aesthetic activity is able to honour and confer meaning on the totality of the mortal subject. Benjamin's conception of artistic memory is similar. As Rochlitz comments of Benjamin's thought:

`Art is a privileged manifestation of memory. Even if that is not its first goal, it saves from mutism and forgetting certain irreplaceable experiences to which society assigns no other rightful place. Its works make public and conserve through time the possibilities of humanity, the hopes they elicit, the defeats they have undergone.`

The attentiveness of art preserves the objects of the past in their plurality and potentiality.

`Author and Hero` develops a conception of the relation between memory and art as follows:

My memory of the other and of the other's life differs radically from my contemplating and remembering my own life. Memory sees a life and its content in a different way formally; only memory is aesthetically productive (the constituent of content can, of course, be supplied by the observation and recollection of one's own life, but these cannot provide the forming and consummating activity). Memory of someone else's finished life (although anticipation of its end is possible as well) provides the golden key to the aesthetic consummation of a person. An aesthetic approach to a living person forestalls his death, as it were – predetermines his future and renders his future redundant, as it were; immanent to any determinateness of inner life is fate. Memory is an approach to the other from the standpoint of his axiological consummatedness. In a certain sense, memory is hopeless; but on the other hand, only memory knows how to value – independently of purpose and meaning – an already finished life, a life that is totally present-on-hand. (*AH 107*)

Aesthetically productive memory is able to transfigure the total individual life. It confers upon it weight and roundedness. Nevertheless, in so doing it imbues it with a certain hopelessness in the face of death. Benjamin's essay, 'The Storyteller', contains a similar insight:

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‘A man who dies at the age of thirty-five,’ Moritz Heinemann once said, ‘is at every point of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five.’ Nothing is more dubious than this sentence – but for the sole reason that the tense is wrong. A man – so says the truth that was meant here – who died at the age of thirty-five will appear to remembrance at every point of his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five. In other words, the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life. (GS II 456; SW III 156)

Bakhtin and Benjamin both imply that totality is only accessible in the shadow of death. A totalizing art is only possible, in Bakhtin’s words, as ‘the perception of the other under the token of death’ (AH 107). Or, as Benjamin puts it in his description of the benignly totalizing figure of the storyteller: ‘Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell; he has borrowed his authority from death’ (GS II 450; SW III 151).

The totalization which the artist appears to achieve through memory, then, is bought at a price: ‘The deeper and the more perfect the embodiment, the more distinctly do we hear in it the definitive completion of death and at the same time the aesthetic victory over death’ (AH 131). On the one hand, the artist declares the everlasting meaning of individual deaths in defiance of the abstract, biological and historical fact of death; aesthetic consummation seems to proclaim a promise of eternal life. On the other hand, the artist underlines the inevitability of death and the transience of human existence; aesthetic consummation only offers the prospect of death.49  In this fashion, aesthetic consummation sets up a complex relationship between history and eternity, between joy and hopelessness:

49 This second factor appears to be missing in Coates’s account of this passage. Coates reads Bakhtin here in terms of new birth and eternal life. See Coates, Christianity in Bakhtin, pp. 50-51. Bonetskaia’s contextualizing comments are also of interest: ‘In the early twentieth century the Russian cultural consciousness had developed a notion of the artist as a tragic personality: there was a belief in the fatal guilt attached to any creative work. The poet’s guilt was considered similar to that of a murderer, in that the creation of artistic form was always an act of limiting, and in some ways even killing, the vital impulse behind it. Hence Aleksandr Blok in a poem precisely on this theme “The Artist” (“Khudozhsnik”, 1913) uses the image of a cage imprisoning a free bird. Form in relation to life – this is the perspective in which Bakhtin, too, poses the problem of the aesthetic. “The problem of the aesthetic is precisely how the world may be thus paralysed by form.”’ Bonetskaia, ‘Bakhtin’s Aesthetics’, p. 84. It is unclear to what extent this is a merely Russian phenomenon or more a phenomenon of the European Fin de siècle as a whole. One thinks of the connection between artistic creation and death in Huysmans’s A Rebours (1884).
Throughout the entire course of an embodied hero’s life, one can hear the tones of a requiem. Hence that distinctive hopelessness of rhythm as well as its sorrowfully joyful lightness, that is, its relievedness of the pressure exerted by the irresolvable seriousness of meaning. Rhythm takes possession of a life that has been lived: the requiem tones at the end were already heard in the cradle song at the beginning. In art, however, this lived-out life is saved, justified, and consummated in eternal memory; hence the kind, cherishing hopelessness of rhythm. (AH 131)

Perception under the token of death is redemptive. It rescues the life portrayed by conferring upon it the eternal life of memory. Nevertheless, it is peculiarly hopeless, in so far as all the questions of the particular life in consideration have already been answered; all its hopes have already been fulfilled or unfulfilled. The life thus consummated is marked by a resigned knowing-in-advance which is both joyful and melancholy. Paraphrasing the passage from ‘The Storyteller’ once again: such is our approach in remembrance to the man who dies at thirty-five, who remains forever young, but forever fated to die young.

It is possible to discern an analogous relationship between transience and eternity, effected by an orientation towards the past, in the sonnet which forms a central pillar of Benjamin’s interpretation of Baudelaire, ‘A une Passante’:\footnote{This poem embodies much of the structure of Benjamin’s aesthetics, hence the long quotation and the attention that I devote here to Baudelaire’s poem itself. In both Toward a Philosophy of the Act and ‘Author and Hero’, Bakhtin illustrates his understanding of aesthetic activity by means of a reading of Pushkin’s poem, ‘Parting’. This poem, likewise, seems to occupy a privileged place in Bakhtin’s understanding of aesthetic form. It is extraordinary to note the degree of congruence, in terms of underlying structure, between these two poems: a woman who recedes; an attempt to stay time; a projection of eternity; transience and death. See both the poem and its analysis in TPA, pp. 65-72.}

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.  
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,  
Une femme passa, d’une main fastueuse  
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l’ourlet;  
Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.  
Moi, je buvais, crispe comme un extravagant,  
Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l’ouragan,  
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.  

Un éclair... puis la nuit! - Fugitive beauté  
Dont le regard m’a fait soudainement renaître,  
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité?

50 This poem embodies much of the structure of Benjamin’s aesthetics, hence the long quotation and the attention that I devote here to Baudelaire’s poem itself. In both Toward a Philosophy of the Act and ‘Author and Hero’, Bakhtin illustrates his understanding of aesthetic activity by means of a reading of Pushkin’s poem, ‘Parting’. This poem, likewise, seems to occupy a privileged place in Bakhtin’s understanding of aesthetic form. It is extraordinary to note the degree of congruence, in terms of underlying structure, between these two poems: a woman who recedes; an attempt to stay time; a projection of eternity; transience and death. See both the poem and its analysis in TPA, pp. 65-72.
Ailleurs, bien loin d’ici! trop tard ! jamais peut-être ! 
Car j’ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais, 
Ô toi que j’eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!

In the widow’s veil mysteriously and mutely borne along by the crowd, an unknown woman crosses the poet’s field of vision. What this sonnet communicates is simply this: far from experiencing the crowd as an opposing, antagonistic element, the city dweller discovers in the crowd what fascinates him. The delight of the urban poet is love – not at first sight, but at last sight. It is an eternal farewell which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment. Thus, the sonnet deploys the figure of shock, indeed of catastrophe. (GS I 622-23; SW IV 323-24)

The poet's regard is a glance backwards. For, as the woman approaches him, she is already receding into the past. The poem captures a moment of stasis. For one moment, the ‘rue assourdissante’ is counterposed to the implied quiet of the widow’s ‘grand deuil’ and ‘douleur majestueuse’. From being one of the faceless and objectified figures of the crowd, the woman is transformed into a subject; for, in this auratic moment, she looks back at the poet. It is the transience of her appearance that transforms her into a ‘fugitive beauté’. And yet, it is this very transience that makes the poet feel reborn and project this moment into eternity. In the linking of the transient and the eternal, Baudelaire summons up an image of totality that is hopeless and joyous. The poet’s slowing down, his attention to the fullness of the moment that is passing, reveals all the possibilities in that moment (‘Ô toi que j’eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!’), and at the same time reveals all their hopelessness (‘trop tard! jamais peut-être!’). Benjamin’s description of this as shock and catastrophe is apt: these are the result of the collision of joy (‘the poet’s delight’) and his hopelessness (his awareness of the futility of transience).51 This catastrophe is summed up as ‘love at last sight’, a phrase that might also describe Bakhtin’s aesthetics of consummation.52

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51 Weber’s comments on this passage capture a key aspect of its bitter ambivalence: ‘Such love at last sight imposes direction and meaning upon an apparition whose transfiguring power, Benjamin insists, reposes exclusively upon a mass that as such is never depicted or named. The mass here, invisible and nameless, is precisely that ambivalent, divergent movement that carries the passante even as she appears to emerge out of it.’ Samuel Weber, ‘Mass Mediauras; or, Art, Aura, and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin’, in Ferris (ed.), Benjamin: Theoretical Questions, pp. 27-49 (41).

52 One might also note that this poem contains an image of the shadow of death from which it never quite escapes, the shadow cast by the (young?) widow’s feston and ourlet.
In ‘Epic and Novel’, Bakhtin returns to the concept of commemoration. Here, however, he has revised his evaluation:

Greatness always makes itself known only to descendants, for whom such a quality is always located in the past (it turns into a distanced image); it has become an object of memory and not a living object that one can see and touch. In the genre of the ‘memorial,’ the poet constructs his image in the future and distanced plane of his descendants (cf the inscriptions of oriental despots and Augustus). 

[...] The epic past is a special form for perceiving people and events in art. [...] Artistic representation here is artistic representation sub specie aetemitatis. One may, and in fact one must, memorialize with artistic language only that which is worthy of being remembered, that which should be preserved in the memory of descendants; an image is created for descendants and this image is projected on to their sublime and distant horizon. Contemporaneity for its own sake (that is to say a contemporaneity that makes no claim on future memory) is molded in clay; contemporaneity for the future (for descendants) is molded in marble or bronze.

The interrelationship of times is important here. The valorized emphasis is not on the future and does not serve the future, no favors are being done it (such favors face an eternity outside time); what is served here is the future memory of a past, a broadening of the world of the absolute past, an enriching of it with new images (at the expense of contemporaneity) – a world that is always opposed in principle to any merely transitory past. (DI 18-19)

It is possible, however, to see a consistency between Bakhtin’s negative view of the memorial here and his positive view of commemoration in ‘Author and Hero’. In the later description of memorialization, the poet seeks not to honour death, but hubristically to deny it.53 (One must remember that Augustus declared himself a god, thus denying his mortal being.) The poet here does not register transience but rather seeks to obliterate it. This form of memorialization does not contain the structure of memory that registers the distance between the time remembered and the time of remembering. Representation sub specie aeternitatis of this sort is a blasphemous denial of time itself. Engaged in a desperate attempt to perpetuate

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53 Benjamin comments on the denial of death are pertinent: ‘Bergson the metaphysician suppresses death. The fact that death is eliminated from Bergson’s durée isolates it effectively from a historical (as well as a pre-historical) order. [...] The durée from which death has been eliminated has the miserable endlessness of a scroll. Tradition is excluded from it. It is the quintessence of a passing moment [Ereignis] that struts about in the borrowed garb of experience’ (GS I 643; SW 336). This suppression of death also distorts and removes experience from history.
power, the marble or bronze statues that result must be condemned to the same fate, one feels, as Shelley's Ozymandias.

The bombast of this second form of memorialization seems to stand in direct opposition to the humble requiem tones of aesthetic memory in the earlier 'Author and Hero'. Bad memorialization, as described in 'Epic and Novel', is memorialization of those in power, those who are 'deemed to be worthy of remembrance' by their own present (DI 18). It is what Benjamin describes in 'On the Concept of History' as empathy with the victors. Good memorialization might, in contrast, consist in that attitude towards the past which effects a stasis in the cause of the forgotten and oppressed of history, once again in the fashion that Benjamin describes in his 'On the Concept of History'. Such an approach to the past, as I have argued earlier, entails an ability to subject it to continual revision, to see in it not the expression of inevitability but rather the source of boundless possibilities. The past, in this fashion, leaves the sphere of the entirely given and regains something of the posited. It is towards just such a conception of the past that Bakhtin moves in his later work.

Bakhtin rejects the conception of aesthetic memory that we have seen in 'Author and Hero', not least because it produces a world that is beautiful but given, and hence dead:

Artistic vision presents us with the whole hero, measured in full and added up in every detail; there must be no secrets for us in the hero with respect to meaning; our faith and hope must be silent. From the very outset, we must experience all of him, deal with the whole of him: in respect to meaning, he must be dead for us, formally dead. (AH 131)

This is unacceptable to the later Bakhtin. On the one hand, during the course of his career, Bakhtin's fear of false totalizing grows to such an extent that even the apparently benign totalizing of this sort of aesthetic memory represents a danger. On the other hand, one can also only suggest that the requirement, that in order to become part of aesthetic vision the hero must be 'dead for us', defeats the purpose of aesthetic activity itself: the preserving and benign bestowal of form on life.
It is in this light that one must view Bakhtin’s conception of the past in his fragment of 1974, ‘Towards a Methodology of the Human Sciences’:

There is neither a first or last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meaning, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. The problem of great time. (SG 170)

In this formulation, the attitude taken towards the past is towards a past in which nothing is absolutely dead. Here, there always remains the possibility of remembering what has been forgotten, of recalling and invigorating the unfulfilled hopes of the past.54 Here, any orientation towards the past is a form of memory that draws the past into the living present and hence makes way for a redeemed future. Such a temporal orientation will make space for what, already in ‘Author and Hero’, Bakhtin defines as the absolute future:

The absolute future, the future of meaning. That is, not into the future which will leave everything in its place, but into the future which must finally fulfil, accomplish everything, the future which we oppose to the present and the past as a salvation, transfiguration, and redemption. That is, the future not as a bare temporal category, but as a category of meaning – as that which axiologically does not yet exist; that which is still undetermined; that which is not yet discredited by existence. (AH 118)

It is hard to ignore here the connection with Benjamin’s conception of the relation of the messianic future to profane, historical time, referred to above, according to which the Kingdom of God is not the telos but rather the terminus of history. For both Bakhtin and Benjamin the fragmented nature of historical being is to be

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54 It must be conceded that ‘Epic and Novel’, the most deconstructive of Bakhtin’s essays, rejects almost entirely the concept of memory in relation to the novel: ‘The “modernity” of the novel is indestructible, and verges on an unjust evaluation of the times. Let us recall the re-evaluation of the past that occurred during the Renaissance […] and that is inherent in positivism (the exposure of myth, legend, heroization, a maximum departure from memory […]’ (DI 31). Towards the end of his life, Bakhtin reincorporates some of the insights of his earliest period. This revised conception of memory stems from this period. It may also be usefully related to Bakhtin’s thoughts on criticism and tradition, discussed in Chapter 1.
fulfilled and brought to an end by a future which is radically incommensurate with the past and present. This is the ultimate task which will provide redeemed givenness.

It follows, then, that, for all the attraction of artistic forms of benign completion, such as the aesthetic finalization in memory of ‘Author and Hero’ or the aural mode of story-telling, Bakhtin and Benjamin must give these up and seek out artistic forms that are, on the contrary, open: the polyphonic novel, montage, and cognate forms. For these forms do not consign their material to the past but retain a connection to a living present and an ever-open, if dangerous future. The polyphonic novel draws its material into an expanded present. On the one hand, the present of the novel reaches into the past: ‘characteristic for the historical novel is a positively weighted modernizing, an erasing of temporal boundaries, the recognition of an eternal present’ (DI 365). On the other hand, the present of the novel points into the future:

It is precisely the zone of contact with an inconclusive present (and consequently with the future) that creates the necessity of this incongruity of a man with himself. There always remain in him unrealized potential and unrealized demands. The future exists, and this future ineluctably touches on the individual, has its roots in him. [...] There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness; there always remains a need for the future, and a place for this future must be found. (DI 37)

This temporal orientation towards an open present is different from memory. Aesthetic memory consists in the attempt to slow time down, to hold on to the particular moment in the face of the eroding stream of time. The temporal orientation described here, however, remains in the present. Its aim is to thicken and spatialize time and to bring into being an expanded present in which competing and divergent possibilities might coexist. This is the form of stasis that Bakhtin discerns in Dostoevsky:

The fundamental category in Dostoevsky’s mode of artistic visualizing was not evolution but coexistence and interaction. He saw and conceived his world primarily in terms of space, not time. Hence his deep affinity for the dramatic form. Dostoevsky strives to organize all available meaningful material, all material of reality into one time-frame, in the form of dramatic juxtaposition. [...] Dostoevsky attempted to perceive the very stages themselves in their
simultaneity, to juxtapose and counterpose them dramatically, and not
to stretch them out into an evolving sequence. For him, to get one’s
bearing on the world meant to conceive all its contents as
simultaneous, and to guess at their interrelationships in the cross-
section of a single moment. (DP 28)

In this temporal orientation, ‘reality […] is only one of many possible realities; it
is not inevitable, not arbitrary, it bears within itself other possibilities’ (DP 37).

Benjamin’s aesthetics also propose forms of *stasis* of this nature, analogous
to Bakhtin’s ‘dramatic juxtaposition’. As we have seen, montage substitutes
diachronic relations of sequence with synchronic relations of juxtaposition.
Similarly, the effect of mechanical reproduction is the spatialization of time. In
the destruction of aura, the unique object’s historical testimony through time is
replaced by the simultaneous coexistence of its many reproductions in time. As in
Bakhtin, these moments of *stasis* that interrupt the flow of events reveal to the
contemplator the alternative possibilities in the present. The dragging of the art­
work from the cultic and ritual past into the present liberates it for new purposes
in the future. Similarly, as we have seen, in Brecht’s epic theatre, interruption,
through *Verfremdungseffekte*, creates an expanded present in which the distracted
audience can reflect on how events might be different, in which the claims of
competing viewpoints can coexist and be evaluated. As in Bakhtin’s polyphonic
novel, reality reveals itself here as ‘one of many possible realities’, ‘not arbitrary’,
and as bearing within itself ‘many possibilities’.

It is, however, in Benjamin’s concept of dialectics at standstill and the
dialectical image that this idea receives its most powerful expression:

Thinking involves both thoughts in motion 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. (GS V 595; AP 475)
The dialectical image, what Andrew Benjamin describes as a form of ‘temporal montage’, is a means of bringing the material of the past into a relationship with the present in such a fashion that a pathway to a redeemed future is opened up.\(^5\) Similarly, the expanded present of the polyphonic novel contains ‘tension between dialectical oppositions’.\(^6\) The force of present and unresolved oppositions in the dramatic juxtapositions of dialogic discourse gives such discourse an urgency - ready at any moment to blast open the continuum of the historical process and spring over the threshold into the future.

For both Bakhtin and Benjamin, provisional openness and an orientation towards the present and future are ultimately preferable to premature and possibly false completion. The former make room for the possibility that something utterly unexpected might happen. They present a world that is more alive since it can be changed at any moment. They do not block the threshold. They make it possible that the present moment might be the ‘small gateway in time though which the Messiah might enter’ (\textit{GS I} 704; \textit{SW IV} 397). The latter presents a world that is given in advance. It runs the danger that men and women attempt to speak the last word that, in truth, belongs only to God.

\(^6\) Gardiner’s suggestion seems to hit the mark: ‘Like Walter Benjamin, perhaps the Western Marxist he has the most affinity with, Bakhtin therefore exhorts us to probe the gaps and silences, the fractures and the fault lines that expose the operations of a monologism which seeks to effect an ideological closure in order to “blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history”. Only then can the meaning of a suppressed history have its “homecoming festival”; that is, be allowed to speak to us, and we in turn have the linguistic capacity and the cultural resources to answer it in a free and familiar manner, without fear of censure or retribution.’ Gardiner, \textit{Dialogics of Critique}, p. 194.
Conclusory Note: The Actuality of Bakhtin and Benjamin

More than a reshuffling of the deck of Bakhtin and Benjamin scholarship, the thematic centre of my thesis, the question of experience and form, has continuing relevance today. Unlike affirmative theorists of postmodernity, such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, I do not believe that we have left entirely Bakhtin and Benjamin's era - a modernity of flux, characterized, one might argue, by anxiety - and entered a postmodernity of possibility, characterized by play. The dislocation of form and experience continues and has become, if anything, accentuated by the ever-increasing intensity of centrifugal and centripetal forces that operate in processes of globalization and social fragmentation. Never have Bakhtin's and Benjamin's insights been more pertinent in their radical deconstruction of hegemonic and authoritarian hierarchies, combined with a relentless attention to possibilities - not empty possibilities, but possibilities for the intervention of human subjects, possibilities that are tensely coiled in the midst of the new.

The age in which we live is not characterized by the official seriousness of medieval culture which Bakhtin saw undermined by Rabelaisian carnival. Nor is it characterized by quite the same alliance of a cult of primal experience with technology that Benjamin saw in fascism and to which he opposed his own brand of disjunctive critical thinking and disjunctive artistic practice. None the less, it might be argued that the Straussian neo-conservatism, currently dominant in the United States, constitutes a qualitatively similar entwinement of myth and technology, and that the promotion of fear and orthodoxy by the proclamation of a 'war on terror' constitutes a new form of official seriousness and fear.\(^1\) Bakhtin and Benjamin's critiques of such phenomena, then, retain their actuality.

In similar fashion, the sense of an 'end of politics', of the 'third way', of the absolute and universal necessity of liberal democracy, as expressed, in

\(^1\) The final chapter of Hirschkop's study provides a subtle analysis of the implications of Bakhtin's conception of fear for political theory, focusing on the official seriousness and fear inherent in the everyday as an instrument of hegemony. Completed in 1999, the book does not deal with our new culture of fear. See Hirschkop, *Bakhtin*, pp. 272-98.
different forms, by thinkers such as Anthony Giddens, Jürgen Habermas, and Ulrich Beck, has become the hegemonic discourse of our post-1989 world. It has become (taking a Bakhtinian standpoint) the monologic discourse which brooks no answering back. It has become (taking a Benjaminian standpoint) an uncritical hypostatization of the concept of progress which can conceive of no possible alternative state of affairs other than the present. Frustration at this situation has led some on the left to run into the embrace of some dangerous lovers: Chantal Mouffe into the arms of Carl Schmitt; Slavoj Žižek into the arms of Lenin. An alliance of Bakhtin and Benjamin may provide a more effective theoretical resource in breaking out of the Denkverbot of late capitalism. For the emancipatory forms that challenge authority need not be the by-now dusty pages of Dostoevsky or the by-now familiar stage-tricks of Brecht. Both thinkers exhibit a lucid ability to see potentialities in the nascent, in the still-coming-into-being. It may take a perspective that draws on both Bakhtin and Benjamin to engage with such nascent forms. Furthermore, the alliance of politics and ethics, of political commitment and loving attention, that is formed when we bring Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s thought alongside each other is deeply valuable and powerful.


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