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WALTER BENJAMIN, REMEMBRANCE, AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR^{*}

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In August, 1914, Walter Benjamin, along with many other twenty-two year old German men, volunteered for the Kaiser's army. He acted, however, according to his friend Gershom Scholem, "not out of enthusiasm for the war but to anticipate the ineluctable conscription in a way that would have permitted him to remain among friends and like-minded people."¹ Benjamin was, as it happened, refused because of badly swollen hands, and when it came the turn of his age group to be drafted that fall, he faked palsy and was able to postpone induction until another order arrived to report in January, 1917. Again he was able to avoid conscription by trickery, undergoing hypnosis to simulate the symptoms of sciatica.² Shortly thereafter, Benjamin left Germany for Bern, Switzerland with the hypnotist, who was also his new wife, Dora Kellner. This was Benjamin's first emigration from his native country in a period of crisis, but not his last. After the armistice, following a short stay in Austria, the Benjamins returned to Berlin in March, 1919, where he spent the turbulent years of the Weimar Republic until forced to flee to Paris in 1933.

Walter Benjamin was thus spared the glory and misery of the *Fronterlebnis*, the community of the trenches that so powerfully marked his generation for the rest of their lives, if they were lucky enough, that is, to survive it. But he did not, in fact, escape the violence caused by the war. Indeed, it might be said to have sought him out immediately after the hostilities were declared. On August 8, 1914, two of his friends, the nineteen-year-old poet Friedrich (Fritz) Heinle, to whom he was passionately devoted, and Heinle's lover, Frederika (Rika) Seligson, the sister of one of Benjamin's closest comrades in the Youth Movement, Carla Seligson, committed suicide together in Berlin. Their act, carried out by turning on the gas, was designed as a dramatic protest against the war, a war in which lethal gas was, as we know, to take many more victims. Benjamin learned of the news when

¹Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1981), p. 12. Benjamin himself later wrote that he joined "without a spark of war fever in my heart." *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI (Frankfurt, 1985), p. 481. When he was turned down, his nineteen-year-old brother Georg happily went in his place.

²Ibid., p. 35.

he was awakened by an express letter from Heinle with the grim message "You will find us lying in the Meeting House."³ The place of their deaths was not chosen accidentally; "the Meeting House" (*Sprechsaal*) was the apartment Benjamin had rented as a "debating chamber" for his faction of the Movement.

All accounts concur that Benjamin was inconsolable for months, and indeed seems never to have fully recovered from the loss of Heinle, to whom he could only bear to refer in later years as "my friend."⁴ According to Pierre Missac, who came to know Benjamin in 1937, he was able to overcome his shame at surviving only by "mythologizing the lost friendship."⁵ Heinle, he implied in a 1917 essay on Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, was like Prince Myshkin, who had lived "an immortal life...that without monument, without memory, perhaps without witness, must remain unforgettable."⁶ In the quarter century that followed the initial trauma, ended only by his own suicide in 1940, Benjamin composed seventy-three unpublished sonnets, discovered in the Bibliothèque nationale in 1981. Some fifty-two of these he arranged in a cycle dedicated to Heinle, prefaced by a motto from Hölderlin's *Patmos*, which began: "Wenn aber abstirbt alsdenn/ An dem am

³Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1978), p. 18.

⁴Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 11. For accounts of the impact of his death, see John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, 1993), p. 54, Hans Puttnies and Gary Smith, *Benjaminiana* (Giessen, 1991), p. 18; and Momme Broderson, *Walter Benjamin: A Biography*, trans. Malcolm R. Green and Ingrida Ligers, ed., Martina Dervis (London, 1996), p. 69f. The fullest account of their friendship can be found in Rolf Tiedemann's *Nachwort to Benjamin*, Sonette (Frankfurt, 1986). They had, in fact, only met in the spring of 1913 and had gone through a period of some estrangement the following winter, but clearly the tie was strong. Although Benjamin himself resolutely resisted psychologism of any sort, it is difficult to avoid remarking on the palpable effect of the friendship and its tragic end on his own famously saturnine character. Significantly, he was not alone in reacting this way, as the suicides led to what Broderson, *Walter Benjamin* (p. 70) calls a veritable cult among Heinle's friends.

⁵Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p. 4. On the importance of survival in the structure of trauma in general, see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, 1996), chapter 3.

⁶Benjamin, "'Der Idiot' von Dostojewskij," *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, eds., Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt, 1977), p. 239. For an excellent analysis of this essay and its relevance to Heinle's suicide, see Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 43-47.

meisten/ Die Schönheit hing (...)."⁷ His will, which was discovered in 1966, revealed that "my entire estate contains in addition to my own writings primarily the works of the brothers Fritz and Wolf Heinle," the latter having also been a poet and friend, who died prematurely in 1923 at the age of twenty-four.⁸ Until the end, Benjamin had hoped to get his friend's own poetry published, a desire that was to remain unfulfilled until many years later.⁹

Although several commentators have shown that Benjamin's disillusionment with the Youth Movement began well before the war, the suicides intensified and brought to a climax his disgust for the devil's pact he saw between the Movement's alleged idealism, its celebration of pure *Geist*, and its patriotic defense of the state.¹⁰ With the death of the adolescent Heinle came the end of Benjamin's faith in the redemptive mission of youth itself, although he remained stubbornly wedded to its ideals. In March, 1915, he abruptly broke with his mentor in the Youth Movement, Gustav Wyneken, in a harsh letter that detailed his feelings of betrayal.¹¹ During the rest of the war, Benjamin distanced himself from others who defended it, such as Martin Buber, and brutally dropped old friends from the Youth Movement, such as Herbert Belmore.¹² Instead, he gravitated

⁷Benjamin, Sonette, p. 6.

⁸The will is cited in Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 187.

⁹Werner Kraft saw them into print in *Akzente*, 31(1984). See his accompanying essay, "Friedrich C. Heinle," as well as his earlier piece, "Über einen verschollenen Dichter," in *Neue Rundschau*, 78 (1967).

¹⁰Tiedemann writes, "Not only in his life but in his work was the war a caesura, but an even stronger one was the suicide of Heinle caused by it." (p. 117). For accounts, see Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley, 1994), chapter 1; John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, 1993), chapter 1. Before the war Benjamin had defended Heinle to Wyneken against the claim of Georges Barbizon that he was conspiring to take over the Youth Movement journal *Der Anfang*. See the letter of April 4, 1914 to Wyneken in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. I, 1910-1918, eds. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt, 1995), p. 203.

¹¹Benjamin to Gustav Wyneken, March 9, 1915 in Benjamin, *Briefe*, 2 vols., eds. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt a.M., 1966), vol. I, pp. 120-121.

¹²Herbert W. Belmore, "Walter Benjamin," *German Life and Letters*, 15 (1962).

towards like-minded critics of the conflict, although never himself actively engaging in anti-war agitation, and wrote increasingly apocalyptic treatises on the crisis of Western culture. His estrangement from the German university community, which reached its climax with the now notorious rejection of his *Habilitationsschrift* at the University of Frankfurt in 1925, began with his disgust at the spectacle of so many distinguished professors enthusiastically supporting the so-called "ideas of 1914."¹³ The empty bombast of their chauvinist rhetoric hastened his abandonment of traditional notions of linguistic communication, as well as whatever faith he may have had left in the German Jewish fetish of *Kultur* and *Bildung*.¹⁴

It has long been recognized that the war had a decisive effect on all of Benjamin's later work. As one commentator typically put it, "it is the first world war which provides the traumatic background to Benjamin's culture theory, fascism its ultimate context."¹⁵ In particular, it has been acknowledged as a powerful stimulus to his remarkable thoughts on the themes of experience and remembrance, which were to be so crucial a part of his idiosyncratic legacy. One of the most frequently cited passages in his work, from his 1936 essay "The Storyteller," is often cited to show its relevance. It reads:

With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent--not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was

¹³For a discussion, see Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1983), p. 38.

¹⁴For a discussion of the impact of the war on Benjamin's theory of language, see Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism," *New German Critique*, 34 (Winter, 1985). He argues that "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," of 1916 "must be read between the lines as an esoteric response to Buber's pro-war and pro-German position." (p. 105). For a discussion of Benjamin in the context of a generational revolt against the German-Jewish fetish of *Kultur*, see Steven E. Aschheim, "German Jews beyond Bildung and Liberalism: The Radical Jewish Revival in the Weimar Republic," in *Culture and Catastrophe* (New York, 1996).

¹⁵Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (London, 1995), p. 227.

anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly 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 a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.¹⁶

The modern crisis of experience, or more precisely of the integrated, narratively meaningful variety known as *Erfahrung* as opposed to mere discontinuous, lived experience or *Erlebnis*, was thus brought to a head, Benjamin tells us, by the war and its aftermath. No longer can story-tellers lose themselves and their listeners in the nature-like rhythms of tales told over and over again; in the age of mere information, nothing remains beyond the momentary shock of the isolated fact, which defies transmission over time. Despite the efforts by celebrants of the *Fronterlebnis* such as Ernst Jünger to recapture its alleged communal solidarity, Benjamin knew that the technologically manufactured slaughter of the Western front was anything but an "inner experience" worth reenacting in peacetime. In his trenchant 1930 review of the collection edited by Jünger entitled *War and Warrior*, he ferociously denounced the aestheticization of violence and glorification of the "fascist class warrior" he saw lurking behind this new cult of "eternal" war.¹⁷ There could be nothing "beautiful" about such carnage.

These aspects of Benjamin's response to the war are well known. What is perhaps less widely appreciated and will thus be the focus of what follows is the fact that Benjamin, never a straightforward pacifist hostile to all violence,¹⁸ also

¹⁶Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), p. 84.

¹⁷Walter Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, edited by Ernst Jünger," *New German Critique*, 17 (Spring, 1979), pp. 120-128. As with all of his critical targets, Benjamin found certain aspects of Jünger's work worth taking seriously. For comparisons, see Karl-Heinz Bohrer, *Ästhetik des Schreckens* (Munich, 1978), Axel Honneth, "Erschliessung der Vergangenheit," *Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 1 (1993), and Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, p. xxxiv.

¹⁸See in particular, his controversial essay "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections*. According to Irving Wohlfahrt, "Benjamin saw in pacifism no alternative to the cult of war but only its mirror

steadfastly defied all attempts to heal the wounds caused by the war. However much he may have lamented, at least in certain of his moods, the lost experience underlying the storyteller's craft, Benjamin resisted all attempts under present conditions to reconstruct it. He refused, that is, to seek some sort of new symbolic equilibrium through a process of collective mourning that would successfully "work through" the grief, thus the seemingly paradoxical call in his Dostoyevsky essay for an "unforgettable, immortal life" that is nonetheless "without monument, without memory." Steadfastly anti-Hegelian, he protested against a notion of memory as a "re-membling" of what had been dismembered, as an anamnestic totalization of the detotalized.¹⁹ Scornfully rejecting the ways in which culture--at least in its "affirmative" mode--can function to cushion the blows of trauma,²⁰ he wanted to compel his readers to face squarely what had happened and confront its deepest sources rather than let the wounds scar over. Rather than rebuilding the psychological "protective shield" (*Reizschutz*) that Freud saw as penetrated by trauma, he labored to keep it lowered so that the pain would not be numbed. For the ultimate source of the pain was not merely the war itself. As Kevin Newmark has noted,

image." "No-Man's-Land. On Walter Benjamin's 'Destructive Character'," *Diacritics*, 8 (June, 1978), p. 55.

¹⁹Here he differed from his later colleague at the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung, Herbert Marcuse. See the discussion in my *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley, 1984), chapter 7.

²⁰According to Kai Erikson, "Traumatized people often come to feel that they have lost an important measure of control over the circumstances of their own lives and are thus very vulnerable. That is easy to understand. But they also come to feel that they have lost a natural immunity to misfortune and that something awful is almost bound to happen. One of the crucial tasks of culture, let's say, is to help people camouflage the actual risks of the world around them--to help them edit reality in such a way that it seems manageable, to help them edit it in such a way that the dangers pressing in on them from all sides are screened out of their line of vision as they go about their everyday rounds." "Notes on Trauma and Community," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed., Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, 1995), p. 194. Benjamin's disdain for what the Frankfurt School called "affirmative culture" as a means of camouflage was apparent throughout his work. For the classical Frankfurt School's argument, see Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston, 1968). Although Erikson may be using "culture" in a more general, anthropological sense than Marcuse, it too is open to a materialist critique.

Benjamin seems, ultimately, to generalize Freud's hypothesis--produced in response to the traumas of World War I--about the destabilizing and repetitive memory-traces left in accident victims into a global economy of modern life. And in so doing, he gives himself the means of repeatedly bemoaning the traumatic loss of "experience" entailed for the subject when the mode of all possible experience is recognized as a recurrent strategy of defense against the "inhospitable, blinding age of large-scale industrialism."²¹

This generalization was evident, *inter alia*, in his influential discussion of Baudelaire's response to the shocks of modern life. Although he clearly admired the poet's ability to transform his dueling with those shocks into aesthetic creativity and saw him as a pioneer of post-auratic art, he also understood that at times, to cite Michael Levine, "the very defense that was supposed to intercept the shocks of urban life itself turns out to be something that must be defended against."²² Baudelaire's lyric parrying of distressful stimuli, Benjamin implied, could serve to prevent them from becoming truly traumatic, keeping them, that is, at the level of unreflected episodes with no long-term effect on the mind, which failed to register them beyond the moment of impact.²³ Although he understood the reasons for doing so, and indeed has often been read as simply endorsing the poet's heroic stance, Benjamin also tacitly warned against the risks of such defensiveness, which was of a piece with other techniques of anaesthesia developed in the nineteenth century to dull the pain of modern life.²⁴ Shock-parrying purchases its fragile peace, he suggested, at the cost of a deeper understanding of the sources of the shocks, which might ultimately lead to changing them. Shocks, in short, must be allowed to develop into full-fledged

²¹Kevin Newmark, "Traumatic Poetry: Charles Baudelaire and the Shock of Laughter," in Caruth, ed., *Trauma*, p. 238-239.

²² Michael G. Levine, *Writing Through Repression: Literature, Censorship, Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore, 1994), p. 109. Levine's intricate and thoughtful discussion of the ambiguities of Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire goes well beyond this simple point.

²³Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, p. 162f.

²⁴On the issue of anaesthesia and Benjamin, see Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay," *October*, 62 (Fall, 1992).

traumas, for reasons that will be clarified later.

In so arguing, Benjamin was profoundly at odds not only with the 19th-century culture of anaesthesia, but also with the postwar, international "culture of commemoration" that, as George Mosse, Annette Becker and Jay Winter have recently shown, desperately drew on all the resources of tradition and the sacred it could muster to provide meaning and consolation for the survivors.²⁵ Rejecting, for example, the cult of nature that led to the construction of *Heldenhaine* (heroes groves) of oaks and boulders in the German forests, Benjamin wrote:

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....Etching the landscape with flaming banners and trenches, technology wanted to recreate the heroic features of German Idealism. It went astray. What is considered heroic were the features of Hippocrates, the features of death. Deeply imbued with its own depravity, technology gave shape to the apocalyptic face of nature and reduced nature to silence--even though this technology had the power to give nature its voice.²⁶

No pseudo-romantic simulation of pastoral tranquility in cemeteries that were disguised as bucolic landscapes could undo the damage. No ceremonies of reintegration into a community that was already deeply divided before the war could suture the wounds.

The same impulse informed Benjamin's celebrated defense of allegory in *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which has been recognized by Susan Buck-Morss as "a response to the horrifying destructiveness of World War I."²⁷ Understood as a

²⁵George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990); Annette Becker, *La guerre et la foi: De la mort à la mémoire, 1914-1930* (Paris, 1994), and Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995). He was not, to be sure, the only critic of this culture of commemoration. See, for example, the chapter on "Anti-Monuments" in Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York, 1990), which discusses figures like the journalists C.E. Montague and Philip Gibbs and the painter Paul Nash.

²⁶Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism," p. 126.

²⁷Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 178. McCole notes that "behind the study of allegory, in turn, is the prologue to 'The Life of Students' written in the first months of the war." (*Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 265). He discusses this

dialectic of unmediated extremes, opposed to the mediating power of symbolism, allegory refused to sublimate and transfigure a blasted landscape like that of the war into a locus of beauty, a forest of symbolic correspondences.²⁸ "Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption," Benjamin argued, "in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face--or rather in a death's head."²⁹

Benjamin's saturnine attraction to *Trauerspiel*, the endless, repetitive "play" of mourning (or more precisely, melancholy), as opposed to *Trauerarbeit*, the allegedly "healthy" "working through" of grief, was, however, more than a response to the war experience in general.³⁰ It was, I want to argue, specifically linked to his reluctance to close the books on his friends' anti-war suicides. As he argued in the case of another suicide, that of the innocent Otilie in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*,

apocalyptic and decisionist text on p. 63f.

²⁸According to McCole, "The desire to unmask the official monuments to progress, the stabilized totalities and transfigured appearances of the dominant culture, by casting them in the light of the petrified, primordial landscape created on the battlefields of the war--that gave Benjamin his eye for the coherence of the allegorical way of seeing." (*Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 139). I would amend this claim only slightly to include the monuments to the war dead produced by the dominant culture after 1918.

²⁹Benjamin, *The Origin of Baroque Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London, 1977), p. 166. Although sometimes glossed as "death's head," it is perhaps better to imagine *facies hippocratica*, as Robert Hullot-Kentor does in his notes to the English translation of Adorno's *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (Minneapolis, 1989), p. 152, as the face of someone mortally ill.

³⁰For a discussion of the distinction between *Trauerspiel* and *Trauerarbeit*, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk, intro. Jacques Derrida (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 234. The same preference for a kind of play that resisted closure was evident in the scripts for Benjamin's radio plays of the 1930's. "What is significant," according to Jeffrey Mehlman, "is the author's insistence on repetition (*Wiederholung*) in opposition to imitation (*Nachahmung*) as the grounding virtue of play. For imitation (of parents) is the stuff of narcissism, the subjectivist psychologizing that Benjamin seems intent on keeping at bay. Whereas repetition, however oriented toward mastery, retains its traumatic or catastrophic valence to the end." *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years* (Chicago, 1993), p. 5.

the work to which Benjamin devoted a remarkable study in 1922,³¹ making sense of such acts in terms of sacrifice, atonement and reconciliation could only reinforce the evil power of mythic fatalism (and the myth-like social compulsions of bourgeois society).

To understand Benjamin's uncompromising resistance to both the cult of the *Fronterlebnis* and the culture of commemoration, including its pseudo-pastoral naturalism, it is thus necessary to recall the precise nature of the trauma that he personally suffered in the war. For the suicides of two teenagers vainly protesting the outbreak of hostilities cannot have had the same meaning as the deaths of the soldiers who were assumed to have gallantly fought for their country. Although both could be made intelligible, even ennobled, through a rhetoric of sacrifice, in the case of the former, the cause could be construed as even more of a failure than in that of the latter. It certainly was one little honored in the interwar era. Benjamin's bitterness is evident in the autobiographical "Berlin Chronicle" he composed in 1932, in which he wrote of the obstacles he experienced in attempting to lay Fritz Heinle and Rika Seligson to rest: "Even the graveyard demonstrated the boundaries set by the city to all that filled our hearts: it was impossible to procure for the pair who had died together graves in one and the same cemetery."³²

But rather than remaining a prisoner of his resentment, Benjamin ultimately made a virtue out of that failure, or at least turned it into a warning against the premature, affirmatively cultural smoothing over of real contradictions. It was this intransigence that saved him, however close he may seemed to have come, from wallowing in the self-pitying "left-wing melancholy" of the homeless Weimar intellectuals, as well as from the seductive nostrums offered

³¹Benjamin, "Goethes Wahlverwandschaften," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I., eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt, 1974). At times, to be sure, Benjamin had a more nuanced attitude towards myth, as a stage through which culture must pass before genuine *Erfahrung* could be achieved. See Winfried Menninghaus, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Myth," in Smith, ed., *On Walter Benjamin*.

³²Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," *Reflections*, p. 20.

by those on the right.³³ Unlike the commemorative lyrics filled with the traditional healing rhetoric that has allowed Jay Winter to claim that "a complex process of re-sacralization marks the poetry of the war,"³⁴ Benjamin's sonnets to his war dead--or rather anti-war dead--enacted a ritual of unreconciled duality. Here eternal salvation and no less eternal sorrow remained in uneasy juxtaposition, as antinomies that resist dialectical sublation. As Bernhild Boie has noted, whereas the nationalist mobilization of religious rhetoric, in the work of, say, Friedrich Gundolf, sacrificed individual souls for the collective good, Benjamin's poems refused to do so: "Because Gundolf pompously sacralized the profane horror of the hour, he robbed conscience of its responsibility. Benjamin had conceptualized his sonnet cycle as the radical antithesis of such violence."³⁵ Only by a ritualized repetition--the value of ritual, according to Adorno, having been taught Benjamin by the poetry of Stefan George³⁶--could the violence of amnesia be forestalled. Only by refusing false symbolic closure in the present might there still be a chance in the future for the true paradise sought by the idealist self-destroyers buried in their separate and separated graves.

The trope of troubled burial is, in fact, one to which Benjamin returned only a few pages after describing the suicides in the "Berlin Chronicle," where he generalized about the relation between memory, experience and language.

³³Benjamin, "Linke Melancholie. Zu Erich Kästners neuem Gedichtbuch," *Die Gesellschaft*, 8,1 (1931), pp. 181-184.

³⁴Winter, p. 221.

³⁵Bernhild Boie, "Dichtung als Ritual der Erlösung. Zu den wiedergefundenen Sonetten von Walter Benjamin," *Akzente*, 32 (1984), p. 30-31.

³⁶Theodor W. Adorno, "Benjamin the Letter Writer," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. II, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York, 1992), p. 234. Benjamin, to be sure, rejected the aestheticizing elitism and myth-mongering of the George Circle, as shown in his frequent criticism of Friedrich Gundolf. Tiedemann, in fact, argues that the sonnets to Heinle show an explicit rejection of the striving for redemptive form in George. See his *Nachwort*, p. 88-89. The link between ritual and other aspects of Benjamin's work is stressed by Andrew Benjamin, who argues that "it will be in relation to ritual that a conception of experience that involves allegory will emerge. Events are particularized and cannot be repeated. The continuity of ritual is the repetition of the storyteller." "Tradition and Experience: Walter Benjamin's 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire'," in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London, 1989), p. 127.

"Language," he wrote,

shows clearly that memory is not the instrument of exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This confers the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. He must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil.³⁷

Benjamin's own method of digging and redigging his personal past in memoirs like "A Berlin Chronicle" or *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* was, of course, generalized into a tool of cultural rediscovery--or rather redemptive reconstellation--in his never completed *Passagenwerk*. It followed the principle he derived from that restless, obsessive returning to the displaced graves he had experienced in his relation to his dead friends: "remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper depths."³⁸

Benjamin's insistence on not letting the dead rest in peace, at least as long as they remained in false graves, was at the heart of his celebrated critique of historicist attitudes towards the past. Whereas most historicists tacitly assumed a smooth continuity between past and present, based on an Olympian distance from an allegedly objective story, he assumed the guise of the "destructive character" who wanted to blast open the seemingly progressive continuum of history, reconstellating the debris in patterns that would somehow provide flashes of insight into the redemptive potential hidden behind the official narrative.³⁹ It is hard not to hear echoes of his personal anguish over the suicides of Heinle and

³⁷ Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," p. 27.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

³⁹ Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," *Reflections*. The last line of this piece, first published in 1931, shows what was still on Benjamin's mind: "The destructive character lives from the feeling, not that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble." (p. 303).

Seligson when he remarked in the *Passagenwerk* that the task of remembrance is "to save what has miscarried."⁴⁰ The complicated notion of salvation (*Erlösung*) with which he worked, at once theological and political, contained the imperative to rescue what had been forgotten by the victors of history.

As Stéphane Moses has argued, such an act of total recall--what might be called a benign variant of the malady of memory dubbed "hypermnesia" by the French psychologist Théodule Ribot⁴¹--was ultimately aimed at an "*un-knotting* of the *aporias* of the present"⁴² through the mobilization of the utopian potential of the past for future transformation. Rather than constructing spatial topoi of commemoration, those *lieux de mémoire* or *Kriegerdenkmals* that functioned to solidify national identity in the present and justify the alleged sacrifices made in its name, the explicitly u-topian--in the literal sense of "no place"--and ritualized remembrance of past miscarriages must intransigently resist current consolation.

It would perhaps be exaggerated to claim that Benjamin, like Georges Bataille, the friend who saved many of Benjamin's texts after the second world war, consistently wrote "against architecture," to borrow the title of the English translation of Denis Hollier's study of Bataille.⁴³ Benjamin's ambivalent fascination with the glass architecture of complete transparency and public openness promoted by the utopian novelist Paul Scheerbarth must, after all, be acknowledged, as must his enthusiasm for the work of Sigfried Giedion and Adolf Loos.⁴⁴

⁴⁰Benjamin, *Passagenwerk* (Frankfurt a.M., 1982), p. 6ll.

⁴¹Théodule Ribot, *Les Maladies de la mémoire* (Paris, 1881).

⁴²Stéphane Mosès, "The Theological-Political Model of History in the Thought of Walter Benjamin," *History and Memory*, I,2 (Fall/Winter, 1989), p. 31.

⁴³Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

⁴⁴On his fascination with Scheerbarth, see Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, chapter 6. On Benjamin's general attitude towards modern architecture, including the work of Loos, see Michael Müller, "Architektur für das 'schlechte Neue'. Zu Walter Benjamins Verarbeitung

But Benjamin did vigorously protest nonetheless against the attempt to embody symbolic fullness in visible, opaque, built forms above the earth, such as the tower, the cenotaph or the pyramid. Even before the war, he was suspicious of this cultural practice. In his *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, he recalled youthful visits he had made to the triumphal column that had been erected in the capital of a united Germany to commemorate the famous Prussian victory over the French at Sedan. At its base was a gallery of murals, from which he had always averted his gaze out of fear that they would remind him of the illustrations from Dante's *Inferno* he had seen in the house of one of his aunts. "The heroes whose deeds glimmered there in the hall of the column," he wrote, "seemed as quietly infamous as the crowds who did penance whipped by whirlwinds, imprisoned in bleeding tree-stumps, or frozen into blocks of ice. So this gallery was the Hell, the counterpart of the circle of grace around the radiant Victoria above."⁴⁵ No amount of ceremonial gilding, in short, would efface the grim fate of the victims of even the most famous victory.

As is well known, both Benjamin and Bataille were hostile to the general Hegelian logic of sublimation and sublation that sought to transfigure horror into something culturally elevating. Both were suspicious of calls for a return to a lost *Gemeinschaft* through symbolic restoration in architectural terms.⁴⁶ Indeed, as Irving Wohlfahrt has noted, Benjamin's more general relation to the past "marks a clear departure from the Hegelian digestive system, an encyclopedic, (anal-

avantgardistischer Positionen in der Architektur," "Links hatte noch alles sich zu enträtseln..." *Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, ed., Burkhardt Lindner (Frankfurt, 1978).

⁴⁵ Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* (Frankfurt, 1989), p. 17. The translation is by Shierry Weber Nicholsen from the forthcoming English version of the book. I thank her for letting me see it before publication.

⁴⁶ For a discussion of Benjamin's thoughts on the metropolis, which highlights his rejection of *Gemeinschaft* as impossible to restore, see Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (New Haven, 1993), p. 92f. It is for this reason that Richard Terdiman's placement of Benjamin in the same camp as those nostalgic theorists influenced by Tönnies' classic distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* is problematic. See his *Present Past*, p. 206.

)retentive, self-interiorizing memory (*Er-Innerung*) which 'preserves and negates' (*aufheben*) the entirety of its prehistory."⁴⁷ Such "digestive" remembering can only be premised on a certain forgetting, the forgetting of everything that resists incorporation into its system, such as the suicides of anti-war protestors, which are then abjected as so much unnecessary waste.⁴⁸

In fact, even the war itself, Benjamin once speculated, might be understood on one level as a comparable kind of misconceived struggle to heal the fissures that rent modern life. It had been, he wrote in *One-Way Street* of 1928, a "desperate attempt at a new commingling with the cosmic powers,"⁴⁹ which would overcome the gap between man and nature that had disastrously widened since the time of antiquity through the application of technical means. "This immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale, that is, in the spirit of technology. But because the lust for profit of the ruling class sought satisfaction through it, technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath."⁵⁰ Benjamin may have held out hope for a different version of benign technology not in the service of that lust for profit, and thus did not reject the desire for reconciliation between man and nature out of hand. But he was resolutely against the distorted effort that characterized the war, as well as the aestheticization of destructive technology that he saw in the postwar writings of Jünger and other "reactionary modernists."⁵¹

Only a variant of what Lenin had called "revolutionary defeatism," a willingness to ride the catastrophe until the end rather than stop it prematurely

⁴⁷Wohlfahrt, "No-Man's-Land," p. 63.

⁴⁸On the dialectic of remembering and forgetting in Benjamin, see Timothy Bahti, "Theories of Knowledge: Fate and Forgetting in the Early Works of Walter Benjamin," in *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, ed., Rainer Nägele (Detroit, 1988).

⁴⁹Benjamin, "One-Way Street," *Reflections*, p. 93.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹For a discussion of this phenomenon, which draws on Benjamin, see Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1984).

before its full destructive fury could be allowed to do its work, would provide a sober alternative to such aestheticization. The daily catastrophe of even peacetime society had to be understood as such, and this knowledge had to facilitate a more fundamental reckoning with the forces that led to the war in the first place. As he put it at the conclusion of his essay on Jünger's volume on *War and Warrior*, referring to "the habitues of the catatonic forces of terror," they will possess "a key to happiness" only "when they use this discovery to transform this war into civil war and thereby perform that Marxist trick which alone is a match for this sinister runic humbug."⁵²

Not surprisingly, Benjamin could not stomach the religious rhetoric of Resurrection employed by certain artists after the war to give meaning to those who died in battle.⁵³ "Everything saturnine," Benjamin wrote in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, "points down into the depths of the earth."⁵⁴ Thus, the labyrinth, that subterranean tangle so often evoked in descriptions of the trenches on the western front,⁵⁵ was preferable to the monument as a spur to the right kind of remembrance.⁵⁶ Although originally an archaic topography, it was revived, Benjamin later argued, in the modern city, the locus of the *flaneur* and the prostitute, where the minotaur mythically situated at its center embodies the

⁵²Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism," p. 128.

⁵³See Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, chapter 6, for a discussion of the appropriation of the Resurrection by artists like Georges Rouault.

⁵⁴Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 152.

⁵⁵For a discussion, see Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, 1979), chapter 3.

⁵⁶See Hollier, *Against Architecture*, pp. 57-73, for the importance of the labyrinth in Bataille. On its role in Benjamin's work, see Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children*, p. 63f, and Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Oxford, 1996), passim. Gilloch also discusses Benjamin's practice of designating certain places in Berlin, such as the Meeting House where the suicides took place, as "counter-monuments" to the official ones set up by the state, such as the Victory Column (p. 75f). He goes so far as to call the Meeting House a "holy place for Benjamin," which perhaps underplays the de-sacralizing impulse in Benjamin's work.

image of "death-dealing forces."⁵⁷

Accordingly, it is only the dead body acknowledged as nothing but the corpse that it has become, only, that is, a melancholy acceptance of the destruction of the organic, holistic, lived body, that prepares the remains for their allegorical and emblematic purposes. "The human body," Benjamin grimly wrote, "could be no exception to the commandment which ordered the destruction of the organic so that the true meaning, as it was written and ordained, might be picked up from its fragments....The characters of the *Trauerspiel* die, because it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter into the homeland of allegory. It is not for the sake of immortality that they meet their end, but for the sake of the corpse."⁵⁸

Although it is impossible to be certain that Benjamin's refusal to seek consolation for the trauma of his friends' suicides found an expression in his bleak ruminations on unresurrected, fragmented corpses in his book on Baroque Tragic Drama, the parallel between the two is striking. In both cases, the proper attitude was one of allegorical melancholy rather than symbolic mourning. The restless ghosts of Heinle and Seligson seem to haunt the pages of this book and much else in Benjamin's *oeuvre*, which one commentator has gone so far as to call a "love affair with death."⁵⁹

Benjamin's morbid preoccupations were thus the opposite of those that fed the widespread revival of spiritualism, which accompanied that superstitious belief in the uncanny presence of lost comrades prevalent among soldiers at the front.⁶⁰ For whereas the soldiers yearned for the dead miraculously to return to life and thus end their own grieving, Benjamin, resolutely hostile to vitalism of any kind, sought to keep the grief unconsolated by focusing on the de-animation that

⁵⁷Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," *New German Critique*, 34 (Winter, 1985), p. 53.

⁵⁸Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 216-217.

⁵⁹Rey Chow, "Walter Benjamin's Love Affair with Death," *New German Critique*, 48 (Fall, 1989).

⁶⁰Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p. 64f.

had produced the corpse. "Criticism," he was famously to argue in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, "means the mortification of the works....not then--as the romantics have it--awakening of the consciousness in living works, but the settlement of knowledge in dead ones."⁶¹ Mortification of the non-textual world as well, or at least facing the catastrophe that had already occurred, was preferable to wishing it away. Rather than seek life in death, the animate in the inanimate, it was better to acknowledge the ubiquity of *memento mori* and decry the false consolations offered by magical thinking.⁶² Only in so doing might the utopian hope for an ultimate apokatastasis, the redemption of all the fragments of fallen reality, the admission of all souls into heaven, be maintained.⁶³ Only then might happen a true awakening from the spell of myth and mystification that produced the conditions that led to the war in the first place.

Benjamin's desperate gamble that such an outcome might possibly follow from the rigorous denial of any consolation in the present has aroused considerable discomfort in many of his commentators. The nihilist streak evident in his antinomian evocation of divine violence and refusal to endorse the humanist pieties of conciliation and communication--as if the promise of the Youth Movement's *Sprechsaal* had been smashed forever by the self-destructive violence committed in its halls--seems to some a literal dead end. According to Gillian Rose, "it is this unequivocal refusal of any dynamic of mutual recognition and struggle which keeps Benjamin's thinking restricted to the stasis of desertion, *aberrated*

⁶¹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 182.

⁶² Gary Smith has argued that in the early 1920's Benjamin did share a certain rhetoric of spiritual esotericism with other heterodox Jewish thinkers of his day, including Oskar Goldberg, Erich Unger, Erich Gutkind and Scholem. See Smith, "'Die Zauberjuden': Walter Benjamin and Other Jewish Esoterics Between the World Wars," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 4, (1995). However, he acknowledges that Benjamin always found Goldberg distasteful and ultimately came to dissociate himself explicitly from the other "Magic Jews." See Benjamin's letter to Scholem of December 24, 1934, where he uses the term derisively. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre (New York, 1989), p. 148.

⁶³ On the idea of apokatastasis in Benjamin, see Irving Wohlfahrt, "Et Cetera? De l'historien comme chiffonnier," in *Walter Benjamin à Paris*, ed., Heinz Wismann (Paris, 1986), pp. 596-609.

mourning, and the yearning for invisible, divine violence."⁶⁴ His defense of repetitive, never-worked through remembrance Rose sees as grounded in the Jewish notion of *Zakhor*, which she claims devalues actual historical and political awareness in the name of eschatological repetition.⁶⁵

What she calls "inaugurated" as opposed to "aberrated mourning" contains the potential for forgiveness that Benjamin, with his furious fixation on the injustice of his friends' anti-war suicides, could never realize. As such, Benjamin's position may seem uncomfortably close to what the recent historian of psychoanalysis Peter Homans has called the Nazi's own "refusal to mourn."⁶⁶ For, to put it in the vocabulary of Judith Lewis Herman, it favors the maintenance of "traumatic memory," which simply repeats the past, over "narrative memory," which works it through by telling intelligible stories.⁶⁷

Jeffrey Mehlman, from a vantage point far less Hegelian than Rose's, suggests other dangers. Benjamin's insistence on valorizing catastrophe rather than trying to heal it, on "plunging into evil, albeit to defeat it from within,"⁶⁸ echoes the Jewish messianic tradition that Scholem had shown often promoted

⁶⁴Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford, 1993), p. 209.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 207. For a more nuanced account of Jewish notions of memory, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York, 1989). He does not include Benjamin in his discussion.

⁶⁶Peter Homans, *The Ability to Mourn: Disillusionment and the Social Origins of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago, 1989). He argues that the Nazis, "intolerant of chaos[,]...sought to reinvent with great rapidity and astonishing creativity a total common culture in which a sacred symbolic structure overcame time, the sense of transience and diachrony....For them, the manic defense and persecutory activity successfully energized a new cosmology which abolished the ability to mourn and what I would also call 'the capacity to be depressed.' It was as if they had said, There has been no loss at all." (p. 338). The larger argument of the book is that psychoanalysis, unlike Nazism, was based on a healthy ability to mourn the loss of cultural meaning produced by secularization.

⁶⁷Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York, 1992). For a critique of this argument, which comes close to Benjamin's position without drawing on it, see Ruth Leys, "Traumatic Cures: Shell Shock, Janet, and the Question of Memory," *Critical Inquiry*, 20, 4 (Summer, 1994), pp. 623-662. She shows that for Pierre Janet, fully narrating the past was itself insufficient, as some liquidation of it as well was necessary to "cure" shell shock.

⁶⁸Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children*, p. 80.

mystical transgression as a means to redemption. It also recalls the tragic episode of the seventeenth-century false messiah Sabbatai Zvi, in which catastrophe was mingled with fraud, an explosive mixture that Mehlman ingeniously discerns in the scripts of Benjamin's radio plays of the early 1930's. Sabbatianism, he notes, rejected the symbolic reading of the world in the earlier Kabbalah in favor of an allegorical one, in which there was no apparent or natural unity between sign and signified. But this dissolution had its great danger. For now, to be a good Jew and to appear to be one were no longer necessarily the same, which opened the door to the possibility of a false messiah, such as the Sabbatai Zvi.

In the case of what he calls Benjamin's "neo-Sabbatianism,"⁶⁹ the same dangerous possibility exists. That is, there could be no guarantee that Benjamin's desperate wager on melancholic intransigence and resistance to commemorative healing would ultimately bring about the genuine redemption for which he so fervently yearned. Especially when he yoked his negative theology to the Marxist dream of a classless society, as he did in the final lines of his essay on Jünger's *War and Warrior* when he advocated the transformation of war into a civil war, the potential for catastrophe to produce fraud rather than salvation was increased still further.⁷⁰ When one recalls Benjamin's own willingness to use fraudulent means to dodge the draft during the first world war--one of the few links in the chain left unforged by Mehlman's superheated associative imagination--it may well seem as if he were not above exploiting both catastrophe and fraud for his own dubious redemptive fantasies.

A third critique is made by those who claim that by holding on to such

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 94.

⁷⁰ Mehlman hints at the end of his book that it is not so much the Marxist dream of a classless society that constitutes the fraudulent echo of Sabbatianism, but the Enlightenment dream of assimilation itself. The latter, he claims, leads to the "‘silent Holocaust’ of Jewish self-denial which is the daily mode of ordinary Jewish life in the West." *Walter Benjamin for Children*, p. 97. In effect, Rose attacks Benjamin for his allegiance to a Jewish notion of repetitive, ahistorical memory, whereas Mehlman criticizes him for fostering the dissolution of Jewish particularity in the universal solvent of the Enlightenment.

fantasies in whatever form Benjamin drew inadvertently near to the very fascist aestheticization of politics he was ostensibly trying to fight. This is the damning conclusion, for example, of Leo Bersani's *The Culture of Redemption*.⁷¹ From this perspective, Benjamin's apparent resistance to symbolic mourning, his defiance of the imperative to work through his grief, is understood as still in the service of an ultimate reconciliation, which is impossible to attain. Whereas neo-Hegelians like Gillian Rose fault Benjamin for rejecting a good version of mourning--inaugurated rather than aberrated in her vocabulary--anti-Hegelians like Bersani see a desire for *any* version of mourning as problematically holistic and harmonistic, based on a nostalgia for an origin prior to the fall, a state of bliss that never really existed.⁷²

What these critics perhaps fail to register is the critical distinction between a refusal to mourn that knows all too well what its object is--in Benjamin's case, the anti-war suicides of his idealist friends--and is afraid that mourning will close the case prematurely on the cause for which they died, and a refusal to mourn based on a denial that there was anything lost in the first place. Whereas Benjamin defended allegorical melancholy to keep the wound open in the hope of some later utopian redemption, understanding ritual and repetition as a placeholder for a future happiness, the Nazis sought symbolic closure without any delay, hoping to fashion a seamless continuity between the revered war dead and their own martyrs.⁷³ Rather than melancholic, their refusal to mourn was

⁷¹"The cultic use value of art that Benjamin claims we have lost is actually an archaic version of the fascist use of art as he dramatically defines it in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction': the aestheticizing of politics." Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), p. 60.

⁷²For a consideration of the issue of origin in Benjamin, see John Pizer, *Toward a Theory of Radical Origin: Essays on Modern German Thought* (Lincoln, Ne., 1995). Pizer argues that the concept of *Ursprung* in Benjamin, derived in part from Karl Kraus, must be understood as more than a simple return to plenitudinous grace. But he rejects the deconstructionist reading of Benjamin as being entirely against all notions of origin.

⁷³According to Mosse, "the martyrs of the Nazi movement were identified with the dead of the First World War, and identical symbols were used to honor their memory: steel helmets, holy flames, and monuments which projected the Nazi dead as clones of the soldiers who had earlier fought and died for the fatherland." *Fallen Soldiers*, p. 183.

maniacal, in the clinical sense of a mania that giddily denies the reality of the lost object. Melancholy and mania, as Freud famously argued, may be both sides of the same inability to mourn, but in this case, the differences, it seems to me, outweigh the similarities.

What makes Benjamin's hopes for redemption so hard to grasp is that they seem not to have been grounded in a simple desire to undo the trauma of the anti-war suicides and resurrect the dead or even merely to realize the anti-war cause for which they died. Instead, the model of redemption he seems to have favored, I want to suggest, may paradoxically have been based on the lesson of trauma itself. Was he perhaps talking more of himself than of Baudelaire when he wrote in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" that "psychiatry knows traumatophile types?"⁷⁴ It will be recalled that Benjamin's critique of Baudelaire's poetic parrying of the shocks of modern life was directed at the anaesthetic refusal to register the pain of the trauma; it meant keeping the protective shield of the psyche up at all costs. Like the aesthetic response of symbolic sublimation, defensive parrying struggled to regain the subject's mastery over a world that seemed out of control. In a certain sense, both aesthetic and anaesthetic responses missed something in their haste to move beyond that pain. Or put differently, both were too hasty in trying to reconcile the unreconcilable. What was unreconcilable about trauma has been noted by Freud, who understood, to cite Cathy Caruth, "that the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time....trauma is not simple or single experience of events but...events insofar as they are traumatic, assume their force precisely in their temporal delay."⁷⁵

Benjamin's redemptive fantasies, such as they were, were thus not for harmonistic closure and plenitudinous presence. They were u-topian, as we have seen, precisely because they denied a positive place that could be the locus of

⁷⁴Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," p. 165.

⁷⁵Cathy Caruth, "Introduction" to Caruth, ed., *Trauma*, p. 9.

fulfillment. They were also temporally disjunctive, *pace* his frequent evocation of the mystical notion of *Jetztzeit* (Now-time). Favoring instead what might be called the stereoscopic time of the dialectical image, they incorporated that experience of lag time produced by trauma. They were thus based on a notion of memory that differed from a Hegelian *Erinnerung*, in which the past was digested by the present in a heightened moment of totalizing interiorization. Instead, Benjamin's notion of *Gedächtnis* preserved the very dissociation between past and present, the temporal delay of the trauma itself, that made a constellation--and not a collapse--of the two possible. For only if the distinctness of past and present and the heterogeneity of multiple spaces were maintained could a true apokatastasis, a benign hypermnnesia without exclusion and incorporation, be achieved. Only if the intractable otherness of the lost object is preserved and not neutralized through a process of incorporation can the possibility of genuine *Erfahrung* be realized.⁷⁶ Thus, in some profoundly paradoxical sense, the catastrophe and the redemption were the same, and the infinite ritual repetition without closure not a means, but an end. The true fraud, *pace* Mehlman, is thus the very belief in the resurrection of the dead, their symbolic recuperation through communal efforts to justify their alleged "sacrifice" and ignore their unrecuperable pain.

It is for this reason that Benjamin's intransigent resistance to symbolic healing and positive commemoration is still worth pondering, however harsh it may seem to those who understandably crave relief from their suffering. For even if one is unable to share his belief in utopian apokatastasis, it must be acknowledged that he gave the lie to the assumption that the victims of the war--

⁷⁶According to Angelika Rauch's insightful gloss on Benjamin's position, "As memory of an experience, commemoration or remembrance must refuse the labor of mourning because such a *Trauerarbeit* aims at the representation of the other--the experience and affect--by turning it into what Benjamin had labeled 'a souvenir,' that is, an object in conscious memory that corresponds to an object in the history of events. Once the other has achieved the status of an object, the subject can dispose of it. If an experience in the sense of *Erfahrung* is, however, responsible for shaping the self, is part of the self, then it cannot so easily be split off, disposed of, and, in the end, forgotten. The mission of tradition is precisely not to make experience into an event or an object because only the power of feeling humbles us, sensitizes us to an other, and teaches us to live with what Kant had identified as the monstrosity of the sublime." "The Broken Vessel of Tradition," *Representations*, 53 (Winter, 1996), p. 90.

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or more profoundly, of the society ruled by myth and injustice that could have allowed it to happen--could be best understood as heroic warriors who died for a noble cause. This is a lesson that ironically can be learned as well from the fate Benjamin himself suffered on the eve of the Second World War. For his suicide on the French/Spanish border also defied symbolic closure. Indeed, his rest proved as peaceless as those of Fritz Heinle and Frederika Seligson in 1914. As Pierre Missac observed in words that can fittingly serve as the final ones of this paper:

His body...disappeared after his death. We have nothing but one more death without burial among so many others; no name on a common grave, even for someone who, while alive, provided a name for the nameless; not even the white cross of the military cemeteries sprinkled across Europe and the Pacific. All the more reason why no tombeau will evoke Benjamin's memory, only the interminable prose pieces after Babel, among them the present work.⁷⁷

⁷⁷Missac, *Benjamin's Passages*, p. 10. One might add that for Adorno in particular, Benjamin's suicide seems to have worked in the way that Heinle's had for Benjamin: as a never worked-through trauma that came to emblemize the horror of the age. See the discussion in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York, 1977). p. 165.