

**Benjamin's Allegorical Hermeneutics:
The Critique of Historicism and the Disclosure of the Historical
"Other"**

Steven Leddin

"The incomparable language of the death's-head: total expressionlessness- the black of the eye sockets- coupled with the most unbridled expression- the grinning rows of teeth"
(Benjamin 2004, 463)

Despite the common and, arguably, correct accusations directed at the fragmentary nature of Benjamin's *oeuvre*, there are certain themes and concepts which persist throughout the disparate and, oftentimes, highly esoteric investigations that fell under the philosopher's scrutiny. These themes strike the reader as continuous points of reference which guide the trajectory of Benjamin's prose and constitute the thread linking the immense diversity of the themes examined by the theorist. Benjamin's thematization of the concept of allegory is one such issue and, as is typical of Benjamin's unconventional and highly deliberative approach, one that only becomes apparent as an implicit philosophical theory within a work ostensibly concerned with an examination of a specific social or cultural artefact.

Allegory, for Benjamin, beyond its confinement to a stylistic device relating signifier and signified is itself transformed into an existential signifier. It names a modality of an encounter between subject and object constituted by impoverished structures of meaning. Thus the figure of the death's-head described

in the above quotation itself presents us with an example of what Benjamin considers the experience of meaning performed by the allegorical. For Benjamin, allegory is characterised by the arbitrary assignment of meaning to disinterested signifiers. Its tropes are the inorganic and the mortified and its mode of expression dissolves any semblance of metaphysical meaning. It is thus in the conscious petrification of history by allegory that Benjamin sees judgement passed on the poverty of experience characteristic of modernity. This paper presents an account of Benjamin's deliberations on allegory as constituting what Beatrice Hanssen terms a "thanatological mode of interpretation" (Hanssen 1998, 33). That is, a theory of meaning and interpretation which takes as its starting point the comparison between meaning formation and death. That is, allegory, according to Benjamin, expresses the arrest of the movement of history within meaning. This is achieved through the commitment to the complete arbitrariness of signifiers, their interchangability and fungibility. However, the allegorical viewpoint is itself to be conceived dialectically. The reduction of meaning to "pure signification" is, at the same time, the revelation of the potential to participate in redeemed experience. By exposing the artificiality of the structures of meaning once conceived of as natural the allegorical gaze thus elevates these to a second degree. Allegorical interpretation thus contains within itself the potency for the revelation of the new and absolutely "other" as that which cannot be incorporated into the semantic structures of quotidian communication. As a theory of meaning and interpretation, Benjamin's work will be compared to the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer due to their mutual explication on the divergence between symbol and expression and their shared hostility to the historicist approach to understanding. For both, the historicist approach originates in the idealist assumption of the ahistorical nature of truth. It aims, as Benjamin explains in Thesis XVI of "On the Concept of History", at "an eternal image of the past" (Benjamin 2003, 396). Accordingly, the concept of history assumed by the

historicist approach is one of empty homogeneity and simple teleological linearity. Benjamin, in contrast, aims to read history allegorically, as containing the potential for its own critique and thus indicating the possibility of an ineffable “other” to conditions of impoverished experience. The paper will thus present Benjamin’s deliberations on allegory as a particular form of hermeneutics which attempts to delineate an unimpoverished experience of the historical through a method of disclosive critique. It is through this disclosive critique that allegory indicates the potential for otherness within representative form. Allegory, as opposed to symbol, testifies to the *inorganic* unity of meaning. That is, within allegorical representation the arbitrariness of language and meaning is itself simultaneously signified reflexively thereby disclosing the truth of what he terms impoverished experience. Allegorical signification is thus a form of interpretation sensitive to the ineluctable otherness repressed in conventional signification. In its expression of the historical situation of meaning formation it becomes a negative indicator of redeemed experience. Accordingly, Benjamin’s continued emphasis on images of inorganic and petrified nature represent precisely this embodiment of an unrepresentable otherness, an otherness that requires recognition of the historical structure of experience in order to be realised. In this manner, the paper will begin with an account of Benjamin’s critique of the idealist presuppositions of historicism as outlined his “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy” before moving on to a consideration of the concept of “Origin” as conceived by the historical materialist before outlining his elaboration on allegory in the *Trauerspiel* book.

On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy

The discrediting of the role and influence of history and tradition in the orientation of our understanding and the resultant reduction of experience and knowledge to “the lowest order” was, for Walter Benjamin, a continuous source

of critique, as well as an occurrence equiprimordial with the need to establish the certitude of knowledge characteristic of the Enlightenment. The “prejudice against prejudice itself” that for Hans-Georg Gadamer constituted the reduction of the notion of understanding during the Enlightenment, and its consequential valorisation of method, is echoed by Benjamin in his 1918 essay “On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy”. In this essay, which ostensibly functions as a critique of the bifurcation of knowledge and experience and the consequential identification of experience (*Erlebnis*) with the ephemeral, which Benjamin views as the result of an inheritance of Kantian philosophy typical of the Enlightenment, we can see the germination of the theorist’s persistent concern with the meaning of history as a question fundamental to the continuation of philosophy. As the title of the essay suggests, Benjamin seeks to disclose a “programme for research” by which philosophy will be guided through a diagnosis of the limitations of past inquiries. According to Benjamin, the fundamental misconception of the Enlightenment was its inability to develop a comprehensive account of experience. Evidential of its times, the concept of experience arising from the Kantian system reflected the superficiality of the predominant natural sciences. Thus, for Benjamin, “the very fact that Kant was able to commence his immense work under the constellation of the Enlightenment indicates that he undertook his work on the basis of an experience virtually reduced to a nadir, to a minimum significance” (Benjamin 2004, 101). The insubstantiality of this notion of experience is however an indicator of the reliance of Enlightenment epistemology on the “mythology” which according to Benjamin, “sublimated though it may be, of an individual ego which receives sensations by means of its senses and forms its ideas on the basis of them” (Benjamin 2004, 103).

Although still displaying a certain tendency towards systemization, Benjamin, even in his earliest work, was acutely aware of the insufficiency of the static, atemporal concept of experience determined by Enlightenment

epistemology. Pre-empting his more extensive excursus in his “On the Concept of History”, Benjamin in this work already expressed intimations of what he later, and more explicitly, would view as the demand of history to be considered, along with language, as the most fundamental philosophical concern. For Benjamin the inability of Enlightenment philosophy to consider history sufficiently is symptomatic of its predisposition toward, and certitude of, the priority of the eternal over the unique particular and transitory. Confining experience to the disparate and fragmentary, the steadfast prioritisation of the eternal and immutable prevalent in Enlightenment thought, resulted in the characterisation of experience as inferior to the timeless validity of knowledge as guaranteed by the apperceptive subject. It is, however, this equation of validity with eternity that for Benjamin, contra Kant, results in an impoverishment of knowledge and a consequent myopia in the recognition of experience. As such “the most important obstacle to linking a truly time- and eternity-conscious philosophy to Kant” is, according to Benjamin, “the following: The reality with which, and with the knowledge of which, Kant wanted to base knowledge on certainty and truth is a reality of low, perhaps the lowest, order” (Benjamin 2004, 100).

The equation of truth with certitude, for Benjamin, as manifested most explicitly in the Kantian transcendental schematism, has persisted within the “scientific” endeavour of the historicist school to approach history objectively. Analogous to the Husserlian demand for unmediated presentation of “*die sachen selbst*”, the objectivist approach of historicism assumes an ability to extract oneself from the finitude of historical contingency. In this assumption resounds the Idealist assumption of the eternity and autonomy of the rational ego above and beyond the determinations of history. We can thus detect within the parameters of the historicist approach the residues of a subjectivism in which is assumed the ability of the interpreter to transcend his or her historical determinations in order to understand the past in its essence, uncontaminated by the horizon of the

present. The extension of the Cartesian ideal of the autonomous ego within the historicist paradigm is, for Benjamin, anathema to an effective conception of historical interpretation. The retention of the notion of the ego abstracted from its historical conditions within historicism elides the temporal distancing between interpreter and text, past and present (which for Gadamer is a foundational element of the hermeneutic circle), and as such, is constitutive of all understanding. The attempt to extricate oneself from the present thus implicitly perpetuates the fallacy of subjectivism, by denying the extension of the past within the present historicism simultaneously commits itself to the prioritisation of the abstract subject and as such seeks to *possess* historical knowledge rather than *interpret* it. The elimination of the productive aspect of temporal distance contributes to what Gadamer characterises as “the naive assumption of historicism, namely that we must transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age, think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity” (Gadamer 2002, 297).

Within its compulsion towards objective certainty, historicism thus repeats the Idealist prioritisation of eternal essences. In seeking to outline the task of the historical materialist, Benjamin in his “On the Concept of History”, delineates the function of effective historiography *via negativa*, through a critique of the assumptions underlying the historicist programme. The dogmatic assertion of time as a causal, sequential series of discreet events, for Benjamin, informs the constituent inadequacy of the historicist approach. The historicist assumes the past as an object for chronicling, as existing as a closed unity within the continuum of a linear temporality. To explode this assumption, and in its wake establish the contours of an engaged and effective relationship with the historical, has been a concern which has gained an increasing importance and urgency within Benjamin’s corpus. In his exposition of Eduard Fuchs “Collector and Historian”

Benjamin writes, concerning the task of the historical materialist in contradistinction to the historical superficiality of historicism,

Historicism presents an eternal image of the past; historical materialism presents a given experience with the past, an experience which stands unique... The immense forces which remain captive in historicism's 'once upon a time' are freed in this experience. To bring about the consolidation of experience with history, which is original for every present, is the task of historical materialism. It is directed towards a consciousness of the present which explodes the continuum of history (Benjamin 2006, 262).

Historicism thus contents itself with the *prima facie*, and accordingly, perpetuates the myth of history as progress. Historical materialism – in exposing the inadequacy of the linear conception of time – seeks to radicalise interpretation, imbuing it with the recognition of the reciprocation between past and present, of their mutual entwinement and conditionality. Historical materialism, for Benjamin, if it is to retain fidelity to a non-dogmatic conception of time, must attest to the situated nature of its interpretation, and for this reason cannot permit any claims which profess the eternity of its findings. The notion of eternity itself, must be overcome, and revealed as a construct in which the pretensions of Enlightenment theorists valorised the assumptions of progress and autonomy, within the fiction of the constitutive subject. In seeking to discard the blatant subjectivism of the traditional epistemology Benjamin aligns himself with the hermeneutic endeavour to demonstrate the ineluctable situatedness of all interpretation. Of primary concern for a sufficient exposition of the hermeneutical situation is an awareness of the unremitting efficacy of history in the determination of interpretation, “consciousness of being affected by history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) is an element in the act of understanding itself and... is already effectual in *finding the right questions to ask*” (Gadamer 2002, 301). Effective interpretation is thus intimately aware of the inherent contingency of its exposition, and as such, eschews any claim to uncover the past as it is in-itself, free from the concerns of the present.

Historical Materialism against Historicism

The poverty of historicism consists in its adherence to the doctrine of intentionality which, for Benjamin, is representative of the misplaced concern of idealist epistemology and as such projects a narrowing of experience in accordance with the restriction of philosophical inquiry to the establishment of supposed eternal truths. Benjamin, again in agreement with the hermeneutical tradition, proscribes the Idealist equation of truth with both certitude and eternity. For Gadamer, although the concept of intentionality inaugurated by Husserl advances beyond the objectivism of previous philosophy, ultimately in its adherence to commitment of the articulation of the *eidos*, it abandons the historical significance of the notion of the life-world to the concerns of the transcendental reduction. Benjamin, similarly distinguishes his concept of historical materialism from the phenomenological movement, when in “Convolute N” of his “Arcades Project” he writes,

What distinguishes [historical] images from the "essences" of phenomenology is their historical index... These images are to be thought of entirely apart from the categories of the "human sciences," from so-called habitus, from style, and the like. For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time (Benjamin 1999, 462).

Benjamin thus sharply differentiates the goal of historical materialism from what he perceives as the traditional and misplaced concerns of the human sciences. Historical materialism in discarding any assent towards objectivity must admit to an entirely different conception of truth, one which for Benjamin must be realised in its entire historical significance. According to Benjamin in his “On the Concept of History”,

...articulating the past does not mean recognising it ‘the way it really was’. It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in 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. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it (Benjamin 2006, 391).

Interpretation, if it is to recognise truth in its fundamental historicity, must cease to view the past as object, in effect rendering it timeless and static. The past viewed in such a way projects an image of truth bereft of urgency and undetermined by its mode of interpretation. Such a view of truth corresponds to what Benjamin sees as the result of the emptying of the temporal aspect of experience that remains a legacy of the insistence on the primacy of certitude and immutability characteristic of the influence of the natural sciences on philosophy in its Idealist incarnation. What is elided in this assumption is the claim of the past upon the present which, for Benjamin, discloses the potential for the disclosure of otherness in experience and history. Historical materialism as conceived by Benjamin is a form of interpretation in which the perceived stability of meaning is undermined. Because of this, that which was necessarily suppressed in the forging of this meaning, that is the historical particular, can be redeemed through its precise presentation within contemporary historical conditions. Thus, the present is always “shot through” with its other. What Benjamin terms “*Jetztzeit*” (Now-Time) is precisely this potentiality for disclosure. He writes, “History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous empty time, but time filled full with now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charge with now-time, a past which he blasted from the continuum of history” (Benjamin 2003, 395). What is discernible here is the potentiality for a disclosive interpretation to create the conditions for the disclosure of a subterranean otherness within the co-ordinates of the present and through which the redemption of the past guides the historical trajectory. This involves a re-conceived notion of time unencumbered by the Idealist presuppositions of uninterrupted linearity and teleology. Time and history are now to be understood as always-already infused with a critical and galvanized “now”, a charged potency in which the conventional structures of meaning and understanding are ruptured and the site for radical otherness is disclosed. Angelika Rauch explains this as follows:

This presentness which is always about to come is that Now (*Jetztzeit*) in which time becomes readable. It is the now of recognisability that is, in fact, the birth of an authentic historical time, a time of truth. That this time about to come is allied to the coming about of an interpretation that is itself a time and place of truth suggests that reading and interpreting are themselves to be considered a part of the messianic moment in which history reveals itself as truth (Rauch 2000, 58).

Accordingly, if historical materialism is to abandon the naivety of the Enlightenment heritage and embrace truth more emphatically in its historical becoming, a “resolute refusal of the concept of ‘timeless truth’ is in order”, truth, for Benjamin, “nevertheless is not – as Marxism would have it – a merely contingent function of knowing, but is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike” (Benjamin 1999, 463). Truth conceived in its full historicity thus involves an abandoning of the objectivity implied by the causal, linear conception of time employed by the historicist. The historical materialist must instead recognise in this conception of history the residues of the subject–object dichotomy operational within the antiquated epistemology of the Kantian and Neo-Kantian systemisation of knowledge, and the distinction between, and reduction of, experience and knowledge contained therein. This in turn demands a notion of experience which extends beyond the fragmentary appropriation of sensations towards an awareness of the efficacy of tradition on the constitution of interpretation. As Howard Caygill writes, concerning Benjamin’s cultural history:

The first distinction between historicism and historical materialism is couched in terms of the temporality and modality of the experience of the past. Historicism has an experience of the past, regarding it as an object eternally present, while historical materialism has an experience with the past that is a unique and transient constellation. In the latter, the historical object ceases to be an object of and becomes a participant in an historical experience (Benjamin, A. 2005, 90).

The notion of historical experience appropriate to the historical materialist is further developed through Benjamin’s reconstitution of the concept of “origin” as

he elaborates it in the Epistemo-Critical Prologue to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, through which the theorist's discussion of the approach to philosophy most consistent with the aims of the new historiography further distinguishes his approach from historicism. Pre-empting his claim in "On the Concept of History" that "historicism rightly culminates in universal history" (Benjamin 2006, 396), that its empty theoretical gestures exhaust themselves in the redundant categorization of "a mass of data to fill the homogeneous empty time" (Benjamin 2006, 396), Benjamin already in the *Trauerspiel* study mobilises the notion of origin as a critique of the perpetuation of long worn Idealist principles operating within the presuppositions of ineffectual historiographies.

Benjamin contends that "Hegel's [infamous statement] 'so much the worse for the facts' indicates that 'insight into the relationship between essences is the prerogative of the philosopher, and these relationships remain unaltered even if they do not take on their purest form in the world of fact'" (Benjamin 1998, 46). Benjamin, here, reproaches historicism, and its logical conclusion in universal history, with the subsumption of historical fact to the triumphant march of essence presumed by the resolute and blind faith in progress. He continues: "this genuinely idealist attitude pays for its confidence by abandoning the central feature of the idea of origin. For every proof of origin must be prepared to face up to the question of its authenticity" (Benjamin 1998, 46). Thus, the inauthenticity of the idealist, and by extension, the historicist approach is ascribed to its reliance on a paradigm in which is assumed the uninterrupted sequential development of history, and as such, in its heritage of the Kantian regulative idea, equates linearity with progress. Benjamin, accordingly, in his repudiation of the idealist notion of origin, seeks simultaneously to discredit the entire Kantian lineage in philosophy, especially due to the peripheral role it accords to history, that is, its impoverishment within the reduction of experience at the hands of a subject-centred epistemology.

The bifurcation of subject and object that has been the immediate influence of Kantian and Neo-Kantian tradition, has left its trace in the reduction of the potency of history evident in within the subjectivism and abstraction that, for Benjamin, characterised the scientific and positivist temper of historicism. Benjamin, as such, through his deconstruction of the traditional notion of origin, at the same time attempted to exorcise the demon of historicism in favour of the tragically aware “angel of history”. The prolongation of Kantianism within the work of Hermann Cohen was of particular interest to Benjamin, albeit, if only as point of contrast with his own approach. According to David Kaufmann, “for Benjamin, the difference between himself and Cohen is simple. His notion of the Origin is historical and describes the essence as it emerges from the process of becoming, while Cohen’s is purely logical” (Kaufmann 2006, 64). The characterisation of Origin as a logical category deprives it of all but a false semblance of its fundamental historicity. Origin, in this sense, reduced to a mere isolated and transient moment, a fleeting and insignificant impression in which is repeated the Idealist reduction of experience.

Origin, for Benjamin, is thus not to be equated with inauguration, Origin is rather, as Benjamin describes:

Although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [*Entstehung*]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis (Benjamin 1998, 45).

By divorcing the notion of Origin from its traditionally held equivalency with genesis and creation Benjamin instead seeks to interpret it as a moment of historical materialism. Origin, as Benjamin conceives of it, describes the concept of history of which the historical materialist must be aware in order to elude the aporias of historicism. Origin thus establishes the unreduced history of the object of interpretation. In its process it “constitutes the present by splitting it into a pre-

and a post-history and this split is what constitutes its originating historicity” (Weber 2008, 137). If it is to orientate effectively a historically conscious interpretative procedure origin cannot be equated with *creatio ex nihilo*, but rather must be recognised in its persistence as an *event* that neither comes to be nor passes away. Thus Benjamin continues:

That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognised as a process of restoration and re-establishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete (Benjamin 1998, 45).

In describing Origin as a rhythm and emphasising its perpetual flowing and ebbing within time, Benjamin distinguishes it from the causal, sequential notion of history at work within the historicist programme and instead accredits it as irreducible to subjective intention. Origin thus involves both the singularity and repetition of the historical event, thus indicating the mutual determinacy of the past and the present. Origin thus implies a historical reciprocation in which the past is always only ever interpreted from within the horizon and concerns of the present. The event of origin as an always already imperfect and incomplete event attests the unassailability of the present, its interpretation of the past always confined to the singular point of access to the pre-and post-history of the object as determined by its particular historical contours. It thus indicates the irreducible dynamic of all meaning. Meaning always already points towards its other- that is ineluctable movement- as it emerges in the incessant dialectic of past and present. All meaning is thus immanently historical and circumscribed by the hermeneutic circle. The search for the primordially anterior always already thwarted by the ineluctable horizon of the present, each affecting each other in what Hans-Georg Gadamer will call “the event of tradition”, determines the perpetually negative character of the dialectic of origin and, as such, repudiates any notion of

completion entailed by universal history in which otherness and particularity are assimilated into the subsumptive World-Spirit.

The Hermeneutics of Allegory

In order to realise emphatically the hermeneutic insight into the fundamental historicity of understanding, it is necessary that we examine the temporal conditions at work within the determination of structures of representation. No method of representation is, under this analysis, to be extracted from its function with the co-ordinates of a socio-historical life-world. According to this schema, every cultural expression carries, within its manner of signification, a trace of the particular world-view in which it originates. The “inner form” of any work of art, for example, despite the particularities of its manifest content, is never exempted from historical circumstance in its mode of expression. With regard to the coincidence of semantics, defined as “the development of a classification of types of behaviour with respect to [linguistic] signs, and the process of hermeneutical understanding, Hans-Georg Gadamer states: “both [having] their starting point the linguistic form of expression in which our thought is formulated... no longer pass over the primary form in which our intellectual experience is given” (Gadamer 1976, 82). The operation of a structure of representation, more than merely a means of communication is, in its behaviour as a system of signification, at the same time an indicator of the mode of experience of a historical epoch.

The form of expression adopted by any work of art thus contains within its structure the *Weltanschauung* of an historical horizon. As “both semantics and hermeneutics thematize...the totality of our relation to the world that finds its expression in language” (Gadamer 1976, 83), the realisation of the historicity of our language employed in conjunction with analysis of forms of expression illustrate the theoretical obfuscation endured by the false hypostatization of systems of representation such as literary techniques and motifs. The formal

qualities of any work of art are, as such, never to be considered in abstraction from its content. It is instead within the dialectical interplay of these two elements that it is possible to see how the individual work of art as an expression of a particular world view, is itself, related to that world. Meaning is accordingly inseparable from the manner it is conveyed. If this were the case the movement and temporality of meaning and its mode of inscription within the social and cultural sphere, its mobilisation within art and literature and its fundamental tendency towards ambiguity and misapplication would be abjured in favour of a static unequivocality and reification that would render its investigation analogous to the methodologically abstract procedures which fall under the auspices of the natural sciences. Gadamer's contention that "interpretation is impelled by the occasion" (Gadamer 2002, 183) demonstrates the hermeneutic principle of the historically localisable quality of interpretation and understanding, and in this manner, of the experience with the object under scrutiny.

The abdication of the transitoriness of meaning confirms the hegemony of the naturalist paradigm in the thinking of history in particular, and within the human sciences in general and, in turn, relegates the role of interpretation and the presentation of truth to the strict proceduralism of *ars inveniendi*. Walter Benjamin in his "The Origin of German Tragic Drama" gives this abiding concern within the human sciences a particularly acute expression, stating at the beginning of the book "Epistemo-Critical Prologue":

It is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of representation. In its finished form philosophy will, it is true, assume the quality of doctrine, but it does not lie within the power of mere thought to confer such a form. Philosophical doctrine is based on historical codification. It cannot therefore be evoked more geometrico. The more clearly mathematics demonstrates that the total elimination of the problem of representation... is the sign of genuine knowledge, the more conclusively does it reveal its renunciation of that area of truth towards which language is directed (Benjamin 1998, 27).

Benjamin makes clear in this quote his diagnosis that the arrest of philosophical achievement lies in its wilful subordination to the model of the natural sciences. Truth conceived in this manner as abstract and eternal disregards the manner by which it is represented. It thus assumed to be attained as a possession instead rather than manifested in its historical determinacy. Benjamin, through this assertion, emphasises that truth, as a form of meaning, is never alien to, but rather, always circumscribed by the structures of its designation. Understanding and meaning always involve a mutual interplay of presentation and pre-judgemental historically determined categories of application.

Allegory and the “Otherness of Meaning”

The emphasis given by Benjamin to the temporally relational interpretation and understanding of a text is further expounded through an examination of his deliberations on the notion of allegory. For Benjamin the importance of allegory exceeds its confines as representational device, developing beyond this into an experiential modality. Allegory, according to Benjamin, “stand[s] for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century” (Benjamin 1999, 328). Accordingly, allegory as a particular structure of representation inherits a historically specific significance as an indicator of *Weltanschauung* within the temporal horizon. Thus, for Benjamin, allegory is to be distinguished in its particularity and significance as containing within its representational structure a historically specific mode of experience. The truth content of allegory is, as such, irreducible to its manifest content within a specific literary text. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer expounds the etymology of the historical appropriations of the concepts of “symbol” and “allegory”, simultaneously positing the difference in their method of representation as experientially significant beyond mere authorial choice and intention. To facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the historical reception of the allegorical device and its significance as a temporally

localised form of experience, it is essential that we discard equating the function of allegory with that of symbol in order that we recognise in the nuances of difference between the two the expression of two different orders of experience and, as such, two different historical horizons. Gadamer expresses what could be conceived as the essential difference succinctly: “although the two concepts, allegory and symbol, belong to different spheres, they are close to one another not only because of their common structure, representing one thing by means of another, but also because both find their chief application in the religious sphere” (Gadamer 2002, 73). “But”, he continues revealing the most significant difference, “the concept of symbol has a metaphorical background that is entirely lacking in the rhetorical use of allegory” (Gadamer 2002, 73). It is this absence of any discernable metaphysical aspect within allegory in distinction from symbol that for Benjamin provides the former with a modality of representation that he sees as essential to the expression of a certain form of impoverished experience.

The metaphysical impulse of the symbol, in contrast to allegory, is constituted by the positing of the endurance of meaning as symbolic representation. The symbol carries within itself the meaningful and eternal coincidence of the signifier and signified, of the immanent presentation within the symbol of that which it represents, unproblematically and unconditioned by either society or history. Symbolically, that which is expressed is expressed without equivocity and without and perturbation in the order of signification and of meaning. The symbol as a structure of representation perpetuates the myth of the self-sufficiency of language as the expression of meaning. Meaning, in turn, is thus rendered timeless and concurrent within the conventions of linguistic usage. Symbolism assumes, in its schema of representation, an imminent and inherent connection between the non-tangible and its inscription within the semantic field whereas, for Gadamer, “the rhetorical element in the concept of allegory contributes to this development in meaning insofar as allegory assumes not the

kind of original metaphysical affinity that a symbol claims but rather a co-ordination created by convention and dogmatic agreement” (Gadamer 2002, 74). Benjamin expresses the role of allegory in a similar fashion: “the unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence” (Benjamin 1998, 160). Allegorical representation thus does not assume any meaningful connection between signifier and signified. Therefore, the images and tropes of allegorical presentation embody the commodity form; they are interchangeable and exchangeable and possess no significance in themselves. However, it is precisely this reduction of meaning to a “pure signifier” that occurs in allegory that allows it to testify to an irreducible otherness. It is part of the dialectic of allegory that it is through the very instability of its method of signification that it points to the “other” as the site of redeemed history. Allegory performs a disjunction between signifier and signified that undermines any perceived metaphysical unity. This in turn compels a critical hermeneutics by which the very act of interpretation dissolves the claims to the perceived “naturalness” of meaning structures and thus implies the presence of an incomprehensible “other” that both structures and resists incorporation into the process of meaning formation. By exposing the arbitrariness of signification, allegorical interpretation underwrites the repressed history in all meaning formation. In this way, it points towards an emphatic historical consciousness freed from the idealist assumptions of a naive historicism. That is, allegory undermines the metaphysics of meaning underling the historicist attempt at the suspension of the historical present. Allegorical interpretation reveals truth as a constellation of past and present and thus irreducible to the fixity of an indifferent methodological proceduralism. Truth thus always embodies the possibility of its other, its alteration throughout history and the possibility for its expression. Benjamin’s historical materialist thus approaches interpretative practice through

the saturnine gaze of allegory, attentive to the repressed otherness residing within the supposed stability of meaning. Accordingly, allegory is a form of experience acutely aware of the transiency of meaning; “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world as a world in which the detail is of no great importance” (Benjamin 1998, 175). It is through this criticism of “profane existence” that the allegorical viewpoint bears within its gaze a refracted image of the “other” of this impoverished existence. What is exposed as “pure signifier” is simultaneously raised to a higher level as it is imbued with the potential for redeemed history and unimpoverished experience. Terry Eagleton explains: “The mortified landscape of history is redeemed, not by being recuperated into spirit, but by being raised, so to speak, to the second power—converted into a formal repertoire, fashioned into certain enigmatic emblems which then hold the promise of knowledge and possession” (Eagleton 1981, 20).

For Benjamin, allegory as the unconscious expression of the loss of metaphysical unity and certainty has operated most effectively through its incorporation by the German Baroque play. The Baroque play, as an isolated and fleeting movement in German theatre, contained, in Benjamin’s interpretation, the truth of the experience of the time condensed and percolating within its tropes and imagery. Benjamin interprets the Baroque as a mourning play beyond its particular content as manifested within each individual work. The Baroque, more than this, is an expression of a more profound mourning. The Baroque, properly conceived, cannot be considered apart from its continuation of the Greek tragedy, albeit, its employment is in the service of a more saturnine and melancholic experience. Benjamin, here heavily under the influence of Nietzsche’s examination of Greek tragedy, in order to extend his insight into the aesthetic as an expression of a more fundamental impulse, includes within its applicability as a consideration of historical materialism. Thus, for Benjamin, tragedy in its essence is no longer

possible; within its form are also the limitations of its field of applicability. In Greek tragedy the death of the hero is never in vain. His renunciation of the old order, through his sacrifice, is always in the serving of the establishment of a new order. The silence of the hero is a kinetic silence through which myth is extinguished in the refusal to speak its language. According to Samuel Weber: “Tragedy is thus first of all bound to a hero whose silence is prophetic, and whose demise announces the triumph of the self: not so much as an individual but rather in general, as Man and God, and as a People that embodies both in its Community” (Weber 2008, 145). The archetypes of Greek tragedy, of the *progression* of new orders succeeding the myth of the old as represented by the prophetic silence of the hero, is thus no longer tenable in the Baroque mourning play, “in tragedy, speech and the tragic arise together, simultaneously, on the same spot. Every speech in the tragedy is tragically decisive. It is the *pure* word itself that has an immediate tragic force (Benjamin 2004, 59, emphasis mine).

**Allegory and The Baroque
as the Expression of the Death of Meaning in History**

The Baroque play, in contrast, knows no such luxuries. The elevation of the subject in the Greek tragedy through the figure of the sacrificial hero can only be anachronistic in the Baroque, as within the latter, the martyr is replaced with the intriguer, in whom an endless history of repetitions places out within his machinations. Tragedy, as such, would seem to culminate in the Socratic dialogue and the elevation of reason, the suppression of the Dionysian sublime and the hypostatisation of the Apollonian order by which Plato sought the exile of the mimetic and tragic from the polis. This however is belied as the tragic persists sub-ostensively within the dialogical form, which repeats the tragedian motif. The Platonic decision, as such, does not prohibit the tragic arts so much as, through an unconscious imitation of their form; inaugurate a mode of discourse through

which they persist surreptitiously. This persistence, however, is not a triumphant return, as it were, but rather a modified continuation with the secularized language of the mourning play. With the appeal to the primacy of reason, the tragic sublime could thus not be entirely effaced, but rather, modified in order to reflect the changed historical horizon. Thus, according to Benjamin:

In Plato's work, the war which the rationalism of Socrates declared on tragic art is decided against tragedy with a superiority which ultimately affected the challenger more than the object challenged. For this does not happen in the rational spirit of Socrates, so much as in the spirit of the dialogue itself... The dialogue contains pure dramatic language, unfragmented by its dialectic of tragic and comic. This purely dramatic quality restores the mystery which had gradually become secularized in the forms of Greek drama: its language, the language of the new drama, is, in particular, the language of the Trauerspiel (Benjamin 1998, 118).

The mystery which provoked the Greek tragedy, namely, the mystery of the origin of man and his extinguishment in death, thus returns in the language of the Baroque. As reflection of an altered historical constellation, and as such, of a modality of experience adequate to it, the Baroque mourning play can admit no eschatology that was common to the Grecian tragic form. As we have seen, the death of the hero within the Greek tragedy is, at the same time, indicative of a birth. It is in his confrontation with the gods that the tragic hero establishes the notion of selfhood, in the renunciation of the authority of the polytheistic hierarchy that inscribes the notion of autonomy and self-government within the new order created in his wake. Death, like silence, is never the ontological precondition of alienation for the subject, but rather his *telos*. The fulfilment of his purpose in the inauguration of the new humanism. In this way, the Greek tragedy expresses a unity of life and experience, of the immanent understanding of purpose and permanence, secured through the strictly delineated contours of the tragic narrative, "everything moral is bound to life in its extreme sense, that is to say where it fulfils itself in death" (Benjamin 1998, 105). The death of the hero, in this sense, is never the expression of meaninglessness; it is rather its opposite, in

the most emphatic sense. Death is meaningful precisely in its role as redemption. It is in the death of the tragic hero that the community is emancipated from the tyranny of polytheism and redeemed in the completion of its task. Death in the tragic play is the expression of the rigidity of meaning, of the pure immortality of meaning, and as such, even within its postulation of the end of life tragedy affirms the status quo, as Benjamin's critique is thanatological interpretation, existing within the mortification of the work. The permanence of meaning in the Greek tragedy is thus presupposed in its analogy with death and is embodied in the figure of the tragic hero as martyr who, according to Benjamin:

shrinks before death as before a power that is familiar, personal and inherent in him. His life, indeed unfolds from death, which is not its end but its form. For tragic existence acquires its task only because it is intrinsically subject to the limits of both linguistic and physical life which are set within it from its very beginning (Benjamin 1998, 114).

We can thus discern, within the tragic form, a reliance on the notion of history as linear succession. The death of the hero is conceived as a sacrifice from which results the instatement of the self-sufficient community. The tragic represents history as the linear progression of the narrative of redeemed humanity. The death of the hero as the result of his steadfast defiance in the face of the autocracy of polytheism, is transcended, and sublated [*aufgehoben*] in the light of redemption. The dialectical synthesis provided by the expectation of redemption is no longer tenable within the experience inhabited by the Baroque mourning play; its presence can be rebuked by the same means Adorno castigates Hegel's use of "identity as a palliative for dialectical contradiction" (Adorno 1973, 160). The picture of a mankind redeemed within the newly inaugurated social totality, as such, can only exist within the Baroque mourning play as a grotesque parody. The Baroque allegory, in this way, repeats the tropes of the Greek tragedy but as deformed under the experience of an historical horizon alienated from itself, produced in the tension between the remnants of ecclesiasticism as manifested in

the notion of guilt and the strange unfamiliarity of the nascent romantic secularization. It is in this light that we should consider Gadamer's claim that, "the concept of allegory is closely bound up with dogmatics: with the rationalisation of the mythical ... with the reconciliation of the Christian tradition and classical culture, which is the basis of the art and literature of modern Europe and whose last universal form was the Baroque" (Gadamer 2002, 79). The Baroque mourning expresses the tension of its world-view immanently within its form and structure of representation. It, like the Greek tragedy, is set in motion by a concern for the role of man within the world, however, unlike the tragedian, the Baroque writer is estranged from any notion of transcendence through which could be sought the hope of salvation. It is in this pervasive mood of discontent and perturbation that Benjamin locates both the essence of the Baroque form and the inauguration of modernity, as a perpetual reduction of the significance of experience through the loss of tradition. Death in the *Trauerspiel*, unlike its role in the Greek tragedy, does result in the conclusiveness of meaning, in the guarantee of the incontrovertible supremacy of the autonomous individual. If the Baroque mourning play repeats the concerns of the Greek tragedy, it is under the gaze of the melancholia of experience and the uncertainty of meaning. The *agon* of the tragedy, in which the authority of *mythos* is annulled through the defiant silence of the hero and whose death constitutes the shattering of the mythical order through the *decision*, a decision which inscribes the experience of autonomy as the emancipation from fate. In the Baroque court of appeals, the function of the Greek *agon* is subverted to better express the experiential modality of the period. The Baroque court abandons any claim towards permanence and stability in its location and its meaning, its constant permutations and its translocations represent the inability within the Baroque to stabilize any decision. As such, meaning is in a constant state of dislocation arising from the instability of the location of decision. The renunciation of decisionism in the Baroque thus imbues its form with a

significant inconclusiveness that deprives sacrifice of any determinable meaning and such of any sublation into a higher order of existence. Thus, in the Baroque, we can see the germinations of what we can view as analogous to Giorgio Agamben's concept of *Homo Sacer* as existing as a limit-concept, "situated at the intersection of the capacity to be killed and not yet sacrificed" (Agamben 1998, 73). The inconsequentiality of the Baroque decision, in opposition to its foundational role with the Greek tragedy, is a result not merely of the nomadicism of the ontological site of decision, but also of the existential devaluation and ambiguity of the human condition. Within the *Trauerspiel* the human is no longer to be elevated above mere phenomena in the advent of the new anthropocentrism, rather, the human is one thing among many, and represents, under the particular semblance of transcendence reflected in the Baroque, not the site of immanence and totality, but rather of fracturing and confusion. The object of the Baroque is not myth, as it is in the Greek tragedy but rather history, as it is in history that the Baroque defined as this expression of the malformation of religious consternation within a newly secularised historical epoch. The contrast of the notion of the subject in both systems of representations further illustrates this. In tragedy, man assumes superiority through his usurpation of the position previously occupied by the gods, in his assertion of autonomy and individuality he is sacred. This is in contrast to the Baroque, in which "*sacer*", according to Agamben, "designates the person or thing that one cannot touch without dirtying oneself or without dirtying" (Agamben 1998, 79). We are thus presented with two contrasting existential conditions, that of the Greek tragedy in which man, precisely because of his elevation of nature, is able to affect change through his death, through his *sac-rifice*, in comparison to the role of man in the Baroque in the consequences of who's death, we find only the endless deferral of meaning. According to Benjamin:

Death as the form of tragic life, is an individual destiny; in the *Trauerspiel* it frequently takes the form of a communal fate... Whereas the tragic hero, inn

his ‘immortality’, does not save his life, but only his name, in death the characters of the *Trauerspiel* lose only the name bearing individuality, and not the vitality of their role. This survives undiminished in the spirit-world (Benjamin 1998, 136).

The invocation of the idea of a spirit world suggests a form of experience derivative of opposing historical conditions and, as such, requiring different modes of representation. Accordingly, both tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, have, as their object, differing themes of investigation. Tragedy has as its object of investigation the explication of myth, which it is afforded by its inhabiting of the historical conditions in which myth was identified by its ability to be transcended. This, however, is not permitted in the Baroque, which has for its object history, or more specifically, a certain experience of history. Baroque, as such, existing within almost antithetic historical determinations than those of the Greek tragedy, must express itself by means of an entirely different structure of representation. It is with this in mind that Benjamin seeks to deconstruction the predominance of the symbolic category within the Greek tragedy. As we have seen, symbolism assumes a metaphysical co-incident between materiality and the intangible that is alien to allegory. In his extension of the notion of the sublime as applicable to the morally good, Immanuel Kant, in his “Critique of Judgement”, describes the symbol as derivative of the function of the intuitions in which they are applied to concepts *a priori* indirectly by which the judgement “exercises a double function; first applying the concept to the object of sensible intuition, and then applying the mere rule of the reflection made upon that intuition to a quite different object of which the first is only a symbol” (Kant 2005, 140). We thus have an application by analogy of a form of indirect representation in which what is represented is determined by an entirely different schema than the means by which it is represented. There is thus in this conception, an assumption of the sufficiency of the symbol to express what is other than it. The mode of experience *itself* expressed by the symbolic order of representation in one in which the co-

incidence of signifier and signified is not an issue, and as such, operates under the assumptions of a stabilisation of meaning throughout time. Allegory, for Benjamin, however, cannot assume such freedom of expression and its mode of signification as determined by convention is indicative of a highly arbitrary relationship between what is symbolised and its material manifestation. Benjamin therefore, does not so much reject the notion of symbol, but rather, deconstructs it in order to demonstrate its inadequacy for the Baroque life-world. According to Benjamin, “the measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mythical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one might say so, wooden interior” (Benjamin 1998, 165). The symbol thus expresses an inauthentic relationship to time, one in which meaning is assumed to be intransient and eternal. It is in this way incompatible with the historical period of the Baroque in which the attempt to locate historical meaning within the petrified landscape of scenery is its locomotive force. The participation of the symbol within the transcendental is thus an ideological notion in which the distinction between signifier and signified through which history is expressed is effaced in the name of a false totality and harmonizing of meaning. According to Benjamin, allegory “is not convention of expression, but expression of convention” (Benjamin 1998, 175), as such, allegory is the representation of history both in its form and content. The historical truth of the Baroque play is expressed in its representation of history as lost and in decay, the claim to an imminent reconciliation between meaning and form can no longer be made tenable in allegory as “the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified primordial landscape” (Benjamin 1998, 166), as an expression of a historical horizon in which the loss of stability of meaning has in itself called into question the meaning of history.

Conclusion

Benjamin's deliberations on the notion of allegory and its exemplification in the baroque play demonstrate a form of interpretation sensitive to the historical determination of meaning and the potential for the disclosure of otherness implied therein. The "saturnine gaze" offered by the allegorical viewpoint reveals the world in its finitude and destabilizes the claims to permanency and transcendental security that structures of meaning. As his examination of the baroque makes clear, allegorical interpretation reveals the process of signification as a history of its own reification. However, it is immanent to the hermeneutics of allegorical experience that these signifiers, once reduced to their purity, are charged with the possibility for the release of the absolutely other in which history is redeemed through unimpoverished experience. Thus, what is "other" for Benjamin is that which is revealed through emphatic experience and through which history is redeemed. Within his notion of Now-Time is thus the refutation of historicism as an archaically metaphysical conception of history and truth. Historical materialism counters this with a view of truth that is itself historical and thus exists in a dynamic temporal constellation, both itself and other, and disclosed through the disclosive gaze of the allegorical.

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