

# THE CONDUCT OF CONTEMPLATION AND THE GESTURAL ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION IN WALTER BENJAMIN'S "EPISTEMO-CRITICAL PROLOGUE"

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In the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" ("Erkenntniskritische Vorrede") to The Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels) (henceforth Vorrede), Walter Benjamin was concerned with the ethics of his own interpretive gesture in that the rhythm and/or relative velocity of the operations of critical attention that he was at pains to describe as necessary to the methodological procedure of philosophical criticism had an essential rapport—one could also even more pointedly call it a performative relation—with the interpretive content of the analysis and, hence, to the artwork or works under scrutiny. My reading of the Vorrede here is designed to explore the gestural character of Benjamin's propaedeutic. Benjamin's idea of the Baroque (and the related notion of allegory) in the Trauerspiel book (1928)² concerns, I shall argue, not only movement quality in seventeenth-century performance, but the quality of movement of thought necessary to effectively shadow the perception of the "baroque" intermittency inherent to a gesturally-oriented analysis and hence to the analysis of baroque gesture. I shall attempt to show this through a close comparative reading of the German text with the English translation, as the latter elides many of the subtleties crucial to a gesturally oriented reading of the text.

There is no mentality without motility and the question of movement reconstruction concerns the possibility that thought would capture itself in and through its affinities with its own movement. As Samuel Weber has said: "[W]hat Benjamin seeks to articulate in that Preface is not simply another form of cognitive investigation, but rather a form of interpretation that does not take cognition for granted" (1991, 467). If thought partakes of an ethics and aesthetics of gesture, this realization

affects not only the movement of bodies that we refer to as dance, but also the movement of texts that we refer to as writing.<sup>3</sup> Making these two modalities interdependent could be taken from an academic perspective as an anti-disciplinary move in that text and gesture are generally considered to be cognitively disparate.<sup>4</sup> But, beyond this, the movement in question is itself multifaceted in that it extends from dramaturgical movement to verse movement to stage movement and, ultimately, to a conception of the movement of history or how we perceive history to move on stage. This multifaceted conception of movement encompasses both the movement of thought as occasioned by an analytic methodology and the movement within the artwork itself whose interpretation is essential to an understanding of same. One outcome is that the gestural rhythm of intermittency or irregularity can be considered both as a textual gesture and a gestural text. This resultant interdisciplinarity unites the ethical and the aesthetic dimensions of art and its interpretation.

Yet, given the subject of his study—the seventeenth-century German tragedy of mourning—the ethical dimension of the *Vorrede* overflows the performative quality of interpretation in that the object of interpretation itself is also ethically fraught: the gesture of tyranny and/or martyrdom of the baroque sovereign. For this reason, Benjamin's methodology of a fitful and intermittent rhythm of interpretation begs comparison with Carl Schmitt's discussion of the state of exception in *Political Theology* wherein the sovereign decision emanates directly from the state of exception, and is accordingly rendered as swift and decisive rather than fitful and ponderous. "In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition" (1985, 15).<sup>5</sup> By declaring the state of exception that effectively suspends the juridical order, the sovereign exercises "the decision in absolute purity" (13), which is the decision liberated from any juridical norm. And, the first decision is to decide on the exception itself.<sup>6</sup> As Giorgio Agamben has argued: "While for Schmitt the decision is the nexus that unites sovereignty and the state of exception, Benjamin ironically divides sovereign power from its exercise and shows that the baroque sovereign is constitutively incapable of deciding" (2005, 55).<sup>7</sup>

Agamben reflects on one aspect of Benjamin's analysis that hews to the dramaturgy of character in the plays, yet there are many other dramaturgical considerations that need to be accounted for. The *Vorrede*, for example, is not about the baroque sovereign, and in its intentional confusion of different cognitive modes it too allows life to break through "the crust of mechanism," one that Benjamin characterizes as the use of the authoritative quotation habitual to the philosophical treatise. Agamben's indecision could be one way to qualify or give semantic content to intermittency, but what is at issue in the *Vorrede* is the character of the interpretive gesture itself, which is not so much indecisive or "roundabout" as fastidious (*umständlich*). "Ausdauernd hebt das Denken stets von neuem an, umständlich geht es auf die Sache selbst zurück" (Tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object) (Benjamin 1991, 208; 1977, 28). "Roundabout way" does not do justice to the punctilious fussiness of *umständlich*, which suggests a fastidious rather than meandering procedure. Benjamin's methodology of contemplation is no more norm-governed than the action of the decisive or, for that matter, the indecisive sovereign.<sup>8</sup>

Agamben's approach, in any case, is to pinpoint a crucial relation between Schmitt's theorization of the sovereign exception and an earlier essay by Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" (1921) (in Benjamin 1986). "The theory of sovereignty that Schmitt develops in his Political Theology can be read as a precise response to Benjamin's essay" (Agamben 2005, 54). What I wish to problematize, however, is the extension of Benjamin's concept of gesture as pure violence to the larger concerns of interpretation implicit in baroque gesture. For, it seems to me that the violence at issue in the Trauerspiel book in addition to that of the tyrant and the martyr in the plays of mourning is the dialectical violence applied to the body as symbol or allegory, beautiful organic form or petrified thing: the entire attempt at interpretation is geared to the violence of this dialectic and not to the sovereign violence of Gerechtigkeit as in "Critique of Violence." While Agamben makes a convincing argument that in *Political Theology* Schmitt is responding to Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," it is also possible that Benjamin's Trauerspiel book, which develops a far richer and more nuanced thinking on gesture than does "Critique of Violence," itself responds to Schmitt's Political Theology. And, here we are faced with the difference between Schmitt's sovereign decision as gesture and Benjamin's interpretation as gesture. What the Vorrede adds to this discussion is the fact that gesture concerns the whole project of the Trauerspiel book as regards the interpretation of the Baroque, not just the comportment of the baroque monarch on the stage. For, in the analysis of the relation of Schmitt's Political Theology to Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," Agamben develops the thinking that leads to his essay "Notes on Gesture" (2000). It is because Benjamin's idea of gesture in "Critique of Violence" amounts to "violence as pure medium" that Agamben arrives at the idea of gesture in his later essay as itself the communication of communicability, or a means without end. This comes down to understanding gesture, as he puts it in State of Exception, as "never a means but only a manifestation" (2005, 62). What I am arguing for here is a more complex understanding of gesture and the ethics of gesture in Benjamin as instrumental to the methodology of philosophical criticism of the artwork.

#### The Vorrede

I begin with where movement can be found in Benjamin's writing, and for this we must consult the original German in order to perceive certain of Benjamin's crucial subtleties of meaning that are lost in translation. These concern chiefly the specificities of movement analysis that are lost to non-German readers of the 1977 English translation *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. The "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" (abbreviated here to *Vorrede*) shall serve as the main axis of my approach to the *Trauerspiel* book. This text, although notorious for being difficult to reconcile with the book's two long chapters, is actually crucial to an understanding of Benjamin's idea of the Baroque in the German play of mourning, which can only be fully grasped in and as an aesthetics and ethics of gesture. The lts title in German—"*Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*"—suggests that the *Vorrede* is questioning (in the sense of critical of) axiomatic knowledge (*erkenntniskritisch*) rather than concerned with the critical qualities of epistemology (as epistemo-critical might suggest): it is critical, that is, of the *disciplinary* status of philosophical knowledge, which projects certitude about its own self-containment (*Abgeschlossenheit*) qua knowledge. Scientific or axiomatic knowledge

displays its truth in immediate and self-evident terms. Let us retain the term immediacy, which shall have purchase on the aesthetic categories that subsequently emerge.

Benjamin begins with the observation that philosophy is confronted at every turn (*mit jeder Wendung*) with the question of representation (*die Frage der Darstellung*).<sup>11</sup> Thought (*Denken*), which is an action of contemplation, is confronted by writing (*Schrifttum*), the only representational system through which it can be conveyed. The stakes of representation are that it be the representation of truth (*Darstellung der Wahrheit*). The form the representation of thought-as-truth takes, in other terms, is writing. If truth is assured by thought (as subjective contemplation), however, writing betrays it inasmuch as philosophy cannot reflect truth in the form of its own expression. What philosophy lacks is the relationship between form and content proper to art.<sup>12</sup> Philosophy compensates for this lack by asserting its authoritative and systematic method as didacticism (*Lehre*). Benjamin characterizes the form representation takes in philosophical discourse as "historical codification," more precisely, "das autoritäre Zitat" (the authoritative quotation) that typifies the medieval scholastic treatise (1991, 208; 1977, 27).

To say that thought is confronted by the question of representation at every turn, therefore, means that philosophy, once having given up its disciplinary pretense of unimpeachable scientific status (as mathesis universalis), is called upon to recognize itself as hermeneutic rather than foundational. It is, in other terms, called upon to recognize its fragmented rather than totalizing character. Writing cannot transform the act of thinking into authoritative knowledge for the very reason that writing shares the structure—I would almost prefer to say the conduct—of contemplation. The experience of contemplation cannot present itself mimetically in writing because contemplation itself does not have a presentational or mimetic structure. 13 What this means is that philosophy has misconstrued its own method, which, when correctly understood, is that of art as an object presenting itself for contemplation. 14 Benjamin arrives, in this way, at his notion of philosophical criticism. 15 The problem of thinking and writing—the reason why thinking is always "confronted with" representation—is that it cannot present itself in terms of its own experience as temporalized subjective awareness. Here, we reach Benjamin's first important conclusion: the very method of philosophical criticism is *Umweg*, a term translated into English by digression (1991, 208; 1977, 28), but which might better be translated according to its literal meaning—way around or detour. Definitive for representation as a method is detour (Darstellung als Umweg). Detour can be neither authoritative nor systematic. As discussed above with regard to the interpretative gesture, it pertains to digression and its quality is *umständlich*: fussy or fastidious, because taking exception with itself rather than pursuing an inevitable forward movement.

This begs the question: What is the form of thought once we accept that our access to it takes place exclusively through writing, and more specifically through the intermediary of a literary genre? The form of thought that is palpable in its scriptural building block is the sentence. Where does the sentence rejoin the very process of thought from which it issues? By imposing a series of halts, the sentence creates a series of pauses and recommencements: "[A] writer must stop and restart with every new sentence" (1977, 29). The sentence presupposes a rhythm of thought. It is worth noting that in German, the subject is not the writer, but writing itself: "[I]st es der Schrift eigen [it is proper

to writing itself], mit jedem Satze von neuem einzuhalten und anzuheben" (1991, 209). It is, in other terms, the property of the prose form—writing (*Schrift*)—to stop and start, a procedure whose structural necessity is vouchsafed by the sentence itself. The pause at the end of the sentence, like the pause at the expiration of breath, creates a terminus or temporary halt in consequence of which thought is then set moving in a new direction: it is fundamentally discontinuous and, in this sense too, *umständlich*. "The continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation" (1991, 208; 1977, 28).

The pausing for breath (*Atemholen*) determines the very conduct of the sentence: its limited duration, termination, and new beginning. Benjamin attributes an uneven rhythm to sentences as determined by the very temporality of contemplation (*die eigenste Daseinsform der Kontemplation*) they impose by virtue of their interruptiveness. "The mode most proper to the process of contemplation," as the English translation renders it, omits *Daseinsform* (1991, 208): form of being there (*Dasein*) of contemplation. Contemplation lives in the sequentiality of breathing. The form taken by contemplation as linguistic expression (a series of punctuated sentences) is dictated by its very existence in time as part of life process. Since it always encounters its own death in and as expired breath it cannot embody vitality. Here we acquire a deeper understanding of detour as method because it occurs through time as the intermittent rhythm of sentences: beginnings may be slow; maximum speeds are interrupted. With the emphasis placed on starting over, getting distracted, returning to, but differently.... the time-based quality of perception and thought emerges. "For by pursuing different levels of meaning in its examination of one single object it receives both the incentive (*Antrieb*) to begin anew, and the justification for its irregular rhythm" (*intermittierenden Rhythmik*).

Once the term "irregular rhythm," is proffered the metaphor of the artwork as mosaic makes its appearance in the text: "Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation to capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum [Schwung]" (1991, 208; 1977, 28). With the metaphor of the mosaic the grammatical and physiological are detoured, as it were, into the visual. Detour is also motivated by interpretation, that is, by the complexity of issues that arise in interpretation such that a linear path cannot be forged through the artwork and the attendant observation necessitating the renewed return to the object of contemplation. The mosaic itself embodies the formal qualities that oblige its contemplation to proceed fragmentarily, so to speak. "Both [the mosaic and contemplation] are made up of the distant and the disparate" (1991, 208; 1977, 28). Part of interpretation is responsive to the form of writing itself; part is responsive to the visual structure of the artwork. The notion of detail and fragment is essential to both subject and object, if I may put it thus. "The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea." And: "[T]ruth-content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject matter" (1991, 208; 1977, 29). It is precisely at this moment in the text that the necessity to observe—or rather, to contemplate—the object merges with the will to fragment it: to regard it as in pieces, or to segment it. 16 The notion of the artwork is here transported into a corresponding temporality of contemplative conduct. And, this necessity is in itself double. It arises because our vision cannot take in the totality, which instead presents itself as a mosaic; but also, because language itself cannot flow uninterruptedly. Hence, thought itself takes on the form (movement and rhythm) of contemplation that is wholly adequate to its own representation in writing.

Benjamin adds that contemplation does not lack impetus. However, *Schwung* is translated with the English term momentum, which suggests the potential for acceleration is assumed, whereas this is quite the opposite of his meaning as I understand it.<sup>17</sup> Contemplation contradicts the idea of gathering momentum. The very irregularity of movement that Benjamin repeatedly evokes refers to a periodic suspension within movement.<sup>18</sup> Momentum, for its part, is more typical of articulated language and pantomime ("voice and gesture") than it is of writing, and it inevitably leads to a false synthesis. The formal inter-implication of breathing and writing, one within the other, yields "ideas:" "Truth, bodied forth in the dance (*Reigen*) of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge" (1991, 209; 1977, 29). The term for dance used in the German is *Reigen*, which suggests the circular patterns of cosmic dance and foreshadows the notion of constellation in Benjamin's thought.<sup>19</sup> Here, a relation emerges between ideas, in Benjamin's particular sense of the term, and dance; a relation that will be further evidenced in the term choreography in what follows.

We thus return to the title of the *Vorrede* in which knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) is criticized for privileging the *concept* (*Begriff*) to the detriment of the *idea* (*Idee*). It is almost as if with Benjamin one comes into contact with the idea phenomenologically—on the basis, that is, of the formal congruence between breathing, grammatical sentence structure, and artwork as mosaic. This congruence in the gestural components of contemplative and hence hermeneutic method constitutes the ethical quality of interpretive conduct. The concept is from this perspective a possession (*ein Haben*) of consciousness (and hence transcendental) whereas the idea cannot be possessed: it exists in its fragmentary state to be contemplated inasmuch as it hews to the object and to the complementary form of perception of the object. The idea is part of the world and, as fragment of itself, it is the relic of a world past. This sense of the fragment as physical part of the past-real is what lends the fragment its truth status, in Benjaminian terms, as inseparable from its very materiality. Philosophical truth is manifest only in "the formal elements of the preserved work of art" as epitomized by the ruin, which comes to replace the mosaic in the main body of the text as a key allegorical term for the object of contemplation.

In the process of these opening pages Benjamin performs the movement between ideas—representation, breathing, sentence, fragment, mosaic, idea—that make the point of confluence between writing, research, perception, and thought palpable as a movement of thought and as a textual movement. The movement between these terms shows us how movement moves allegorically. This serves in turn to underline the importance of allegory as a keyword for the *Trauerspiel* book since in allegory there is no formal transcendent term but only a sequence of substitutions. "The false appearance of totality is extinguished" (1991, 352; 1977, 176). Writing is productive of the idea as thought-fragment and allegory demands contemplation because its interpretation is necessarily time consuming: neither instinctive nor momentary, it is always mediated in the sense of subject to intermittence.

### Symbol/Allegory

If allegory displays the temporality of ethical contemplation of the artwork, this is specific to the play of mourning as the object of analysis of the *Trauerspiel* book. Herein lies an opportunity to establish a relation between what I believe Benjamin is about in the *Vorrede* and how he deals with the distinction between symbol and allegory in the Chapter "Allegory and Trauerspiel." The contrast in temporalities between the symbol and the allegory could not be more evident, and returns us to the differences between the concept and the idea as discussed in the *Vorrede* and to the difference between the swiftness of the decision in Schmitt and the halting rhythm of contemplation and interpretation in Benjamin. The symbol is immediate—"a momentary totality"—whereas allegory is "progression in a series of moments" (1991, 341; 1977, 165). Benjamin's symbol-allegory pair seems inspired at least in part by the dialectical relationship of Apollo and Dionysus in Nietzsche. Symbol and allegory are in a dialectical relation in that each presupposes a relation between the visual and meaning that is not entirely dichotomous with the other. In the symbol, meaning is "contained within," whereas allegory unleashes depths that separate the visual being from immediate meaning through the depth that is proper to it as well:

The measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden, and if one might say so, wooded interior. (1991, 342; 1977, 165)

The temporality of the symbol is "the mystical instant" inasmuch as the immediacy of the symbol imposes a condensation of experience that suggests the inexpressible or sublime. What prevents its retreat into obscurantism, however, is "the organic, mountain and plant-like quality in the makeup of the symbol" (1991, 342; 1977, 165). In other terms, the symbol "adapts itself to natural forms, penetrates and animates them" (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff cited by Benjamin, 1991, 341; 1977, 164). In sum, "[T]he artistic symbol is plastic," (1991, 341; 1977, 164), which is how the symbol reconciles plastic form with the inexpressible quality of the "mystical symbol." The instant is transformed into a quickening whose consequences can be observed in the natural world of forms. Benjamin refers to Winckelmann and evokes Greco-Roman figure sculpture in allying the symbol with classicism. In this sense, the mystical temporality of the symbol condenses into a sparkling present of the beautiful human form.

# But, allegory, too, is dialectically split:

[A]llegory is not free from a corresponding dialectic, and the contemplative calm with which it immerses itself into the depths which separate visual being from meaning, has none of the disinterested self-sufficiency which is present in the apparently related intention of the sign. (1991, 342; 1977, 165–166)

If the written sign (*Zeichen*) also benefits from a condensation of meaning, Benjamin recognizes the dangers of ascribing to writing itself (*Schrifttum*) the allegorical temporality of interpretation. It is here that an important qualitative shift occurs in which the idea of form extends itself to a theory of genre: in this case, the drama of mourning itself, which deploys narrative temporality. "The

violence of the dialectical movement within these allegorical depths" (1991, 342; 1977, 166) is made clearer not only by resorting to the way genre reorients the use of language with respect to the visual, but also by virtue of a transition toward one of Benjamin's most elusive concepts, that of natural history or the "strange combination [Verschränkung] of nature and history [through which] [...] the allegorical mode of expression is born" (1991, 344; 1977, 167). In the German, Verschränkung (crossing) has a more dialectical ring than combination. The drama of this crossing between nature and history is, like the violence of the dialectic perpetrated on the body by the symbol/allegory dialectic, productive of allegory itself inasmuch as the latter calls forth a specific interpretative methodology that frees itself from timeworn academic authority.

Beatrice Hanssen refers to the contradictory meanings of natural history in the Vorrede: "In the course of the investigation, natural history could either signal the temporality of transience or, quite to the contrary, refer to the dehistoricizing tendency that marked baroque drama," she writes. For Hanssen, "in turning to natural history the mourning play brought about a spatialization (and hence de-historicization) of history – a dynamic Benjamin captured by what he called the 'setting-to-stage' of history" (1998, 50). I would disagree that spatialization in a discussion of dramaturgy can be interpreted as de-historicizing, particularly because spatialization is closely linked to choreography as a means to undercut the sense of forward motion implicit in Aristotelian verisimilitude.<sup>20</sup> But, as with the particular sense of rhythm set forth in the *Vorrede*, space too is not without rhythm and movement. It is the very presence of the stage prop-the main 'protagonist' of the setting—in its palpable physical presence on stage that allows us to perceive what transpires there less as a symbolic allusion to life based on organic metaphor than as a reality whose import is palpably historical on the very basis of its dehumanization, its necessity to endure beyond the narrative limits of life expectancy as ruin. 21 Here too, if we read Benjamin's philosophical aesthetics of dramaturgy in the light of the symbol/allegory distinction and attend to the temporalities implied by these categories, we note that the symbol—which is plastic form or mimesis par excellence—is characterized as "a momentary totality," whereas in allegory "we have progression in a series of moments" (1991, 341; 1977, 165). Where the present is insisted upon, as in theatrical representation, allegory cannot be bereft of temporality and hence of historicity. The point is that this temporality is secular. "For where it is a question of a realization in terms of space - and what else is meant by its secularization other than its transformation into the strictly present - then the most radical procedure is to make events simultaneous" (1991, 370; 1977, 194). The simultaneity of the performative event and the historical event confers a re-enactive logic on theater. <sup>22</sup> So, Benjamin also writes: "History is secularized in the setting [...] chronological movement is grasped and analyzed in a spatial image" (1991, 271; 1977, 92). I would understand the secularization of history as a rejection of a theological notion of political power (see Franko 2007). This is, of course, what Benjamin so ruthlessly exposes in "Critique of Violence." Also worthy of note here is Benjamin's insistence that the setting and the court are one and the same: "For the court is the setting par excellence" (1991, 271; 1977, 92). In other terms, the court is always theatrical and hence a socially determined form of self-representation. As a milieu, therefore, the court has no recourse to a theological or spiritual dimension. The setting is history concretized on the stage as an event simultaneous with the present as self-presentation and self-representation hence a site of intrigue—and not a theologically symbolic site.<sup>23</sup> By the same token, as Weber points out, it is also not the space of the sovereign exception: "The state of exception is excluded as theater" (1992, 17).

### **History as Setting, Prop, and Sign(language)**

Benjamin describes allegory in its essential relationship to human life and human history. Here, history refers not to official history of the body politic: "This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the Baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world" (Das ist der Kern der allegorischen Betrachtung, der barocken: weltliche Exposition der Geschichte als Leidensgeschichte der Welt) (1991, 343; 1977, 166). "The Passion of the world" (as rendered in English) tends toward a 'symbolic' representation of suffering—a "general concept" more in line with allegory (1991, 341; 1977, 164)<sup>24</sup>—whereas, in the German, the secular quality of suffering is underlined quite starkly as "history of suffering." As such, it relates to the "biographical historicity of the individual" as well as the riddle of human suffering (1991, 343; 1977, 166). Here, the presence of death is emphasized as the condition of meaning— "The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance" (1991, 343; 1977 166). Death is the corollary of breathing as contemplation's condition of possibility. With the presence of the phenomenon of death we have the clearest indication of what demarcates history from what Benjamin calls natural history. It is because "nature has always been subject to the power of death" that its significance is historical in a secular sense that differentiates, precisely, in a theatrical sense, classical tragedy from the play of mourning. Benjamin's use of the term symbol resonates with Kantorowicz's use of the term body politic in the context of history. Whereas the body politic is undying, the physical death of the body of the king must be qualified as abject and hence as belonging to the transitory aspect of life: devoid of a symbolic position within remembrance. History is, in this connection, the history of the body politic—"the process of an eternal life," (1991, 353; 1977, 178) which is the life of power—not that of the body natural, in Kantorowicz's terms. But, Benjamin is not speaking here of a symbolic political death that confirms the continuity of power throughout history, but of the death of the body natural: the unrecorded suffering in/of history (Leidensgeschichte) and the fact of mortality and decay (Vergänglichkeit).

To explore the tension between nature and history, Benjamin attends to the qualities of space rather than to movement. Herein lies the connection between the stage prop and the ruin because in both temporality is captured within the spatial. The landscape in its relationship to a stage-setting becomes the scene of a dialectical encounter between history and nature or natural history:

Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted by the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. (1991, 343; 1977, 166)

The petrified landscape will become the locus and, actually, the visible scene of dialectical exchange between symbol and allegory, history and nature. Landscape as scene of this encounter is the ideal

locus for such an exchange both because of its theatrical potential as setting and because of its ability to expose culture to nature in the figure of the ruin. "For when nature bears the imprint of history, that is to say, where it is a setting (*Schauplatz*) does it not have a numismatic quality?" (1991, 349; 1977, 173). The staged representation of nature is itself paradigmatic of an attempt to impose (as if to imprint or emboss) symbolic and therefore redemptive meaning upon the inhuman course of history, one that cannot be reconciled with classical historical discourse. Its stamping or imprint as coin of the realm (its numismatic quality) underlines its political teleology. History clings to one of the fundamental forms of theatrical representation—the décor—even if the décor is a "natural" one in that it is fortuitously placed in nature.

The arbitrary quality of allegorical meaning does not lend specificity to the representation of nature because it endows nature with a force whose only meaning can be derived from the imprint of history upon it. Here, the role of writing (now referred to as script in the English), in its hieroglyphic sense combining writing with image, is to inscribe meaning upon it, hence its numismatic quality, which gives us nature (the landscape) as stage setting. And hence, the tragedy of mourning itself is a symbol of allegorical interpretation inasmuch as it transpires within a setting where the theory of allegory can be manifested as dialectic between history and nature.

But, in the quasi-natural setting history is, nonetheless, defeated. "The transfixed face of signifying nature is victorious, and history must, once and for all, remain contained in the subordinate role of stage-property" (1991, 347; 1977, 171). Since history and the symbolic register are responsible for the illusion of plasticity and ephemeral humanity as protagonists in the setting, to relegate history to the category of the prop is truly to make of history an object rather than an organic body. It is for this reason Benjamin later says there are strictly speaking no actual characters in the genre of *Trauerspiel*, only things. <sup>25</sup> The word *Requisit*—stage prop—reduces the function of history within nature to an element within the setting. As with certain of de Chirico's images of furniture seemingly abandoned in a natural landscape where they are washed away by a flood, history is reduced to a prop, its events "shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting" (1991, 355; 1977, 179). History itself is a stage set inundated by the forces of nature, a mere representation to be swept away. The stage property/setting quality of history when confronted with the eventfulness of nature presents itself in the tragedy of mourning as writing (Schrift): "The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience" (1991, 353; 1977, 177). The allegory of history as prop is "transient" writing (Zeichenschrift): writing as a sign or gesture—as related to sign language, but not to the theatrical script. French ballet à entrées of the early seventeenth century also deployed the body as both decor and writing (see Franko 2015).

No sooner has the stage setting become *Schrift* (as distinguished from *Schrifttum*) than the scene of the ruin as a device with which to stage the dialectic relation between nature and history becomes clear: "The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel* is present in reality in the form of the ruin" (1991, 353; 1977, 177). The ruin, in other terms, is history subject to and subjected to the force of nature. Put otherwise, the ruin is itself the theatrical setting where we see history as staged in nature: "In the ruin, history has physically merged into the setting" (1991, 353; 1977, 178). For history to be staged is for it to become a theater

of objects. The consequence is that we cannot read nature directly as with the momentary appearance of the symbol: we read nature indirectly through history as prop.

The image of the ruin is the ultimate expression of allegory, whose detail or motif is the fragment.<sup>26</sup> Benjamin explains theater with the visual allegory of the image, but brings the two series together when he writes: "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (1991, 354; 1977, 178). Allegory absorbs history within its own ruination. Philosophical criticism can obtain a truth-value not as logos, but by becoming a thought-thing, a *Gedanken-Ding*. Such a thing undermines the momentum of history.

The irregular rhythm of Benjamin's analysis is the result of the superimposition of two critical operations. A dialectical operation through which allegory and symbol are in a superimposed tension because each is found to be perceptible within the other while also being bound in a struggle containing a political dimension; and, a more properly allegorical operation in which meaning is manifested in the slippage or metonymical movement between terms that occurs as if by association or analogy. It is this superimposition of the paradigmatic axis of the dialectic onto the syntagmatic axis of the trace that produces a poetics of *Trauerspiel* that tends toward immobility. Here it would seem fitting that *Trauerspiel* itself evidences the very rhythm of the contemplation required to interpret it: "The *Trauerspiel* is therefore in no way characterized by immobility, nor indeed by slowness of action [...] but by the irregular rhythm of the constant pause, the sudden change of direction, and consolidation into new rigidity" (1991, 373; 1977, 197).<sup>27</sup> These are the very descriptive terms, or can be seen to constitute the descriptive system, of contemplation as discussed in the *Vorrede*.

In this extension of interpretation into the artwork the role of contemplation is relayed to that of choreography. Benjamin attributes the tendency toward stasis in the slowing down of the action of the play of mourning to choreography as image: "[C]hronological movement is grasped and analyzed in a spatial image" (1991, 271; 1977, 92). It is as if all the threads of the analysis thus far converge in the theatrical representation of the court, which is at once verbal and visual. These are depths that contain a certain violence, but not the violence of pure mediality or of the gestural manifestation as Agamben would have it. The depths are dialectical and they affect the human body above all. As mentioned above, the court itself is a theatrical entity, one that is selfrepresenting in that it is self-theatricalizing. In Benjamin's language the sense of setting and image merge here as an encounter between thought and representation that underlines the concordance between what is analyzed and how it is analyzed as discussed apropos of the Vorrede. In this case, however, the way history merges into the setting brings choreographic space into being, a space that is the prime modality of expression of the court itself. "The image of the setting, or more precisely, of the court is the setting par excellence" (1977, 92). The setting is a set of spatial relationships that can be read. The German reads: "der innerste Schauplatz" (the most inward of showplaces) (1991, 271) implying thereby that the proverbial superficiality and show of the court the court in its constitutive theatricality—has, in actuality, its own "wooded interior" or subjective reason for being. The expressive quality of the court is none other than "the spatial continuum, which one might describe as choreographic" (1991, 274; 1977, 95). Hence, the notion of writing as representation that was earlier identified as containing within its own rhythms the conduct of contemplation as itself an ethical methodology, is elaborated upon in the *Trauerspiel* book as choreographic and presented in spatial terms in the third chapter as an attribute of Trauerspiel itself. The dialectic of history and nature becomes theater as choreography: where nature takes over for history, choreography takes over for theater, movement takes over for words. More precisely, the role of movement and visual pattern in what would otherwise be a theater of the word signals not just the influence of (court) ballet as such but the becoming nature of history, the secularization of what might otherwise too easily appear as the outcome of myth or fate. It is in the spatial accent of choreography where the court as setting becomes the expressive material of theater that the historical past can be viewed as a natural phenomenon, that is, as a phenomenon destined to mortality and corruption, "the stations of decline" (1991, 343; 1977, 166). This being is, somewhat counter-intuitively, likened to an object theater.

A vertiginous accumulation of terms of substitution in a dispersed series counterbalances the formulations of the dialectic. This is another form of the manipulation of (discursive) space Benjamin calls choreographic. The space of discourse qua space is one in which the dialectic can be used as a spatial choice in willful juxtaposition to metonomy. The discursive outcome of the dialectic history/nature is the gradual reification of the terms locked in struggle and their consequent tendency to be reshuffled on the horizontal playing board of analogy and substitution. To the becoming fragment of the totality and the becoming thing of the person is added the becoming space of the court and the becoming court of the setting. Fragment, thing, space, court, setting—all avatars of the timeless rebirth of the truth in the fragment—are the very conditions of the return of the unrealized as mourned. Benjamin's understanding of allegory as Baroque is not a period concept but, as I have argued, the fundamental propaedeutic of philosophical criticism. In the body of the Trauerspiel book, Benjamin's concern for the rhythm of contemplation as explored in the Vorrede migrates to the temporality of allegory and the role of choreography in the spatialization of the theater scene as historical. This, I would like to suggest, is the most proper realm of gesture, which assumes at once a temporal and a spatial presence through its choreographic complexity as a movement-object. In this way, the contemplative gesture is seen to exist in the staging of the play of mourning as a choreographic principle.

#### Conclusion

What I hope to have shown in the foregoing analysis is that Benjamin positions gesture in the *Vorrede* as an act that opens up time within space and space within time. This is most evident in the playful and sometimes confounding exchanges between history, nature and setting. The representation of organic form is taken to be a spiritualizing tendency that, as in "Critique of Violence," conceals its law-making functions beneath an aura of inevitability. This also means that gesture can be understood as an act existing between visuality and textuality, an act, in other words, that is able to think itself in and through its own movement. In this sense, then, gesture in the broader sense cannot be understood as a "manifestation." The dichotomy between action and interpretation in gesture effectively dissolves, and consequently any gestural "manifestation"

becomes caught up in reflection. While Agamben's gesture as the communication of communicability would presumably be instantaneous and swift—like the manifestation of the sovereign decision itself or like the instantaneousness of the symbol as distinct from the slow temporality of allegory—the ethical gesturality that emerges as method in the *Vorrede* is founded on a rejection of any "purity" of gesture because said purity must by definition remain inaccessible to a hermeneutics. Benjamin's treatment of gesture as a spatio-temporal phenomenon at once of interpretation and of dramaturgy thus begs attention for its relation to space and time as operations of theater and methodology at one and the same time.

#### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> As such, it differs from a recent study (Newman 2017) of the *Vorrede* as deeply engaged with contemporary interlocutors on the national significance of the historical Baroque to German national identity.
- <sup>2</sup> Interest in Benjamin's import for dance theory is relatively recent in dance scholarship (see Ruprecht 2015).
- <sup>3</sup>I argue elsewhere that this transfer between text and gesture is constitutive of the Baroque as a twentieth-century phenomenon in dance (see Franko 2017; see also Franko 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> For a recent exception to this generally held assumption, see Saussy (2016).
- <sup>5</sup> I am grateful to my graduate student Amanda DiLodovico for having pinpointed the significance of this gestural distinction with ramifications for the distinction between ableism and disablement in historical political theory.
- <sup>6</sup> "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 1985, 5).
- <sup>7</sup> On Benjamin and Schmitt, see Weber (1992) and Bredekamp (2017). Bredekamp examines in depth the postwar fallout from Benjamin's admiring letter to Schmitt in 1930. Bredecamp nonetheless pursues a line of argumentation based on textual analysis as he concludes: "The explanation need be sought on a level that is located beyond the limits of historical circumstances" (686).
- <sup>8</sup> As Weber puts it: "Benjamin encounters the question of sovereignty not simply as a theme of German baroque theater, but as a methodological and theoretical problem: [...] according to Benjamin every attempt to interpret the German baroque risks succumbing to a certain *lack of sovereignty*" (1992, 6).
- <sup>9</sup> A discussion of the French translation, *Origine du Drame Baroque Allemand*, by Sibylle Muller (1985), exceeds the space available here.
- <sup>10</sup> In the following analysis I see Benjamin's discussion as more than, in Rainer Nägele's terms, a question of philosophical versus literary discourse. The "kind of staccato [that] seems to be indicated" (1991, xvi-xvii) is not just a question of philosophical and literary discourse, it is a question of the procedures of contemplation necessary to interpretation and the physical and rhythmic processes these procedures demand of the subject.
- <sup>11</sup> The French translation tells us philosophy is ceaselessly confronted with the problem of presentation rather than representation: "[...] confrontée à la question de la présentation" (23). "Darstellung," of course, can mean presentation, as in theatrical presentation, but the subject of the sentence is the limits encountered by thought in its representation in and as writing. The French translation runs the risk of conflating the meanings of representation and presentation. The danger of the translation of the *Vorrede* is repeatedly to move precipitously toward a synthesis of ideas.
- <sup>12</sup> In the Goethe quote at the start of the *Vorrede*, art is understood not globally but in "every individual object" (1977, 27) or "jedem einzelnen Behandelten" (1991, 207), which attributes to art an always already fragmented being.

- <sup>13</sup> We find ourselves here in a very Derridean realization that thought has the structure of writing.
- <sup>14</sup> But, not any art object: an art object, such as the mosaic, which is always already determined by its fragmented qualities as paradigmatic of art. In fact, as we shall see, the mosaic is exemplary of the art object inasmuch as it subjects itself to contemplation.
- <sup>15</sup> Philosophical criticism presupposes that the philosophical status of the work of art emerges on the basis of the demonstration of the artworks "ruined" status. The force of the term truth for Benjamin inheres in the notion of a power to return: "the basis for a rebirth" (1977, 182). In this sense, the Baroque itself does not return, the Baroque is rather a method of philosophical criticism.
- <sup>16</sup> This is precisely what Benjamin will do to his object of study—the play of mourning—which he does not treat as a genre in the literary-critical tradition he opposes.
- <sup>17</sup> "Philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum" (1977, 28).
- <sup>18</sup> This movement aesthetic was theorized in the Italian Renaissance as *fantasmata* (see Franko 1987).
- <sup>19</sup> Since classical and Christian antiquity, the cosmic dance is depicted as a round dance (see Miller 1986).
- <sup>20</sup> Here a reference could easily be made to the differences between tragedy and the history play in Shakespeare, for example; and, to the relation of the history play to Brecht's epic theater, which Benjamin also wrote about.
- <sup>21</sup> See Benjamin's references to the "primacy of the thing over the personal" (1991, 362; 1977, 187).
- <sup>22</sup> See Franko (2017a).
- <sup>23</sup> "In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting" (1991, 355; 1977, 179).
- <sup>24</sup> Hence, it relates to "symbolic' freedom of expression" and "classical proportion" (1991, 343; 1977, 166) and in this way we can see how the translation does betray the meaning of the text by translating it into symbolical rather than allegorical terms.
- <sup>25</sup> "Allegorical personification has always concealed the fact that its function is not the personification of things, but rather to give the concrete a more imposing form by getting it up as a person" (1991, 362-3; 1977, 187). On the same page, Benjamin speaks of "the primacy of the thing over the personal" as parallel to "the primacy of the fragment over the totality." The fragmented body is the person become thing, and the sculptural fragment—akin to the ruin becomes the model for the dramatis personae of mourning plays. Here, the very persistence of the person is tantamount to the figuration of the symbol as an organic totality. The presence of the person on stage is a priori symbolic—which leads us to see how the modernist interest in the dehumanization of the actor in theorists such as Kleist and Craig is fundamentally baroque. See Franko (1989).
- <sup>26</sup> In the same year Benjamin's thesis appeared in print, Jean Cocteau published a study of Georgio de Chirico in *Le Mystère Laïc: Essai d'étude indirecte* (1928), translated into English by Arno Karlen as "The Secular Mystery: Essay in Indirect Criticism."
- <sup>27</sup> The German adjective rendered in English by "rigidity" is "erstarrt," which is also used for the frozen face of allegory (Erstarrtes Antlitz).

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