

Review article

**The language of things:
Walter Benjamin's primitive thought***

CHRISTOPHER BRACKEN

'About me the inanimate world gently
shuddered; I could have chatted with the
rain itself' —Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal*.

Participation

'Whereas content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin', writes Walter Benjamin in 'The task of the translator', 'the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds' (1996: 258). Though, with notable exceptions, Benjamin's major works have long been available in English translation, they were not enveloped in a robe fit for royalty until Harvard University Press published Volume One of the *Selected Writings* in 1996. The publication of Volume Two in 1999 adds another, ampler fold to this dazzling translation. And just as, for Benjamin, the translator's task is not to imitate the meaning of the original, but to transform the language of the translation by bringing two distinct ways of meaning into 'harmony', so the task of the reviewer of Benjamin's *Selected Writings* is not to reproduce the meaning of his thought, but to show how his way of thinking transforms the language of criticism into the force of critique.

Criticism gives way to critique [*Kritik*] when the linguistic sign ceases to be understood as a 'link' between concept and sound pattern, or between sound pattern and grapheme, and is grasped instead as the participation of the name in the thing named. While criticism is a mediation that allows one thing to represent another, critique, according to Benjamin's dissertation, 'The concept of criticism [*Kritik*] in German

*Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume Two: 1927–1934*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Romanticism' (1996), is a 'mediated immediacy' where representation gives itself something to represent, as if by magic. Indeed, among 'the early Romantics', says Benjamin, 'the concept of critique [*Kritik*] had acquired ... an almost magical meaning; in any case, the term explicitly connoted not the sense of a discerning, unproductive state of mind; rather ... the term 'critical' meant objectively productive, creative out of thoughtful deliberation' (1996: 142).

Years later, in 'The rigorous study of art', he directs the art of critique towards marginal writings when he affirms that 'the new type of researcher' is distinguished by a 'capacity to be at home in marginal domains' and a 'willingness to push research forward to the point' where '*precisely* the insignificant' proves most significant (pp. 668 and 670). The editors of Volume One, Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, opened the marginal domains of Benjamin's work to the English-speaking researcher by selecting for translation from the complete German edition not only the major texts, but an array of luminous fragments unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. Thankfully, the editors of Volume Two, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, have continued drawing attention to the margins, devoting the bulk of 860 pages to Benjamin's diaries, radio talks, travel writings, fragments, and reviews of books, events, and performances. These seemingly insignificant texts at last expose English-speaking readers to the transformative force of Benjamin's critique of language. Since the speculations on language published in Volume Two form a constellation with those already available in Volume One, the full force of Benjamin's critique can be gauged only by a comparison of the two volumes.

Though Volume Two extends the practice, established in Volume One, of presenting Benjamin's texts chronologically by date of composition (the German edition groups them according to genre), it cannot be said that Benjamin's philosophy of language develops over the course of time. True, there is a shift in emphasis, between Volume One and Two, from philosophy to politics, and from philosophical to primal history, but it is the 'fate' of Benjamin's thought to interrupt the temporality of development, economic growth, and globalization. For fate, as he explains in 'Fate and character' (1996), does not link one moment to another in a linear series. Rather, it folds time back on itself. The time of fate 'can at every moment be made simultaneous with another (not present)' (1996: 204). Fate unfolds in those instants when what is present is articulated with what is absent.

In the 'Antitheses concerning word and name', from 1933, Benjamin overlaps two moments in his critique of language by placing new speculations on mimesis side by side with quotations from his early essay

'On language as such and on the language of man'. The 'antitheses' are arranged into two columns: on the left are aphorisms on the word, on the right, aphorisms on the name. Near the top of the left column, stacked one on top of the other, are the following: 'The creative word of God. Its likeness: the human proper name. Its residue: mute nature.' Lower down on the right is this: 'The foundation of the name: communication of matter in its magic community' (p. 717). Far from moving his thought forward, the fragment returns to a critique that Benjamin had outlined almost twenty years earlier. Two theses, in particular, return to circulation. First, there is the thesis that the word is a 'creative' force that does not communicate the meaning of nature, but rather *does* nature. Second, there is the thesis that in the name matter communicates itself, not something other than itself. The name is the 'community' of material things — and therefore 'magical'. To account for this magic is also the reviewer's task.

Whether it is deliberate is uncertain, but in his 'Antitheses' Benjamin reverses the definition of the linguistic sign advanced by Saussure in Part One of the *Course in General Linguistics*, published in the same year as Benjamin's 'On language as such and on the language of man': 1916. 'A linguistic sign', argues Saussure, 'is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern' (1983: 66). Though the sound pattern is not, strictly speaking, a 'material' thing, it is nevertheless more material than a concept, just as a concept is 'more abstract' than a sound pattern:

The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses. This sound pattern may be called a 'material' element only in that it is the representation of our sensory impression. The sound pattern may thus be distinguished from the other element associated with it in a linguistic sign. This other element is generally of a more abstract kind: the concept. (Saussure 1983: 66)

The linguistic sign is therefore a work of mediation in which each element stands in for, and represents, another element or groups of elements. The 'sensory impressions' represent the sound waves that stimulate the apparatus of the ear. The sensory impression is represented by a 'sound pattern' which simultaneously brings a 'concept' to mind, on the condition that the link between concept and sound-pattern is 'institutionalized' in the language that is being spoken (1983: 66–67). Presumably, too, a sign like Saussure's famous 'tree' also refers to the thing named 'tree', in which case the sign, itself a work of mediation, mediates between the thing and those who speak of it. 'No-one', adds

Saussure, ‘disputes the fact that linguistic signs are arbitrary’, for it is self-evident that there is ‘no internal connection’ between, for example, the idea ‘sister’ and ‘the French sequence of sounds *s-ø-r* which acts as its signal’ [signifier] (1983: 67). The signifier is arbitrary, moreover, because ‘unmotivated’: it has no ‘natural connection’ with its signified, except in certain exclamations and onomatopoeic words.

Though he does not allude to it — and perhaps did not even know of it — Benjamin, in ‘On language as such and on the language of man’, dismisses the suggestion that the linguistic sign involves an arbitrary link between a ‘more material’ element, the signifier, and a ‘more abstract’ one, the signified. It is worth noting that the theory of the arbitrariness of the sign is affirmed and rejected in the same year:

Through the word, man is bound to the language of things. The human word is the name of things. Hence it is no longer conceivable, as the bourgeois view of language maintains, that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention. Language never gives *mere* signs. (Benjamin 1996: 69)

Language is not an act of mediation through representation, but ‘a matter of mediation through immediacies’ (see 1996: 126). The form assumed by this paradoxically mediated immediacy is participation. The name ‘participates’ directly in the thing, while the word participates indirectly in the thing through the name. The name is an immediate mediation, and the word a mediate immediacy. Neither word nor name represents anything, but together they move matter, as if by magic.

Benjamin elaborates the theory of participation in ‘The ground of intentional immediacy’, from 1916 or 1917, where he explains that what makes it possible for the word to participate in the object via the name is the name’s participation in both object and word. The name is the ‘ground’ of the word’s intentional relation to the object: ‘The ground of intentional immediacy that is part and parcel of every signifier, most notably the word, is the name within it’ (1996: 87). Though ‘neither the word nor the name is identical with the object of intention’, it is because the name participates in both word and object of intention that the relation between them is not, as Benjamin puts it, ‘fortuitous’: ‘The name is something inherent in the object of intention (an element of it) that can be detached from it. For this reason the name is not fortuitous’ (1996: 87). The link between name and object is an immediate mediation. Since the word participates in the object through the name, the relation between word and object is one of mediate immediacy, though Benjamin’s paradoxes serve only to proliferate questions: ‘The word is not the name, but the name occurs

in the word bound to another elements or elements (Which? Signs?)' (1996: 87). The relation between name and object is immediate-mediate and necessary, and the relation between word and object is mediate-immediate yet arbitrary. The relation between sign and object, though, is at once mediated and arbitrary: 'The sign [\triangle] denotes the word ['triangle'] — that is to say, that which immediately, but not necessarily (unlike the name), signifies the object of intention' (1996: 87).

Further down, Benjamin remarks that the sign — the 'mere' sign — 'refers to the signifier'. But what does the signifier — 'most notably the word' — refer to? Before abandoning the fragment, he advances the possibility that reference occurs not in words but in statements: 'A statement refers to the object via the concept. The concept is employed for the purpose of recognizing the object' (1996: 89). He quickly adds, though, that the object that the concept makes recognizable in the statement is in fact brought into being by an 'act of meaning'. To mean, or, as Benjamin also says, to intend, is not to communicate information about an object, but rather to produce the object of a statement: 'What is meant signifies: 1. The object to which the act of meaning refers. 2. The object that the act of meaning produces through this' (1996: 89). What does 'this' mean? When Benjamin speaks of the object that is 'meant', or 'object of intention', he is echoing Husserl's explication of the act of meaning, although he does not copy Husserl in any simple way.

Every state of consciousness, according to Husserl, 'is, in itself, consciousness of something', regardless of whether that something exists or not. Hence, to be conscious, it is not enough, as Saussure claims, to receive sensory impressions that mediate between cognition and the object of perception. If I experience objects, it is because my consciousness addresses itself to them:

Each *cogito*, each conscious process, we may also say, 'means' something or other and bears in itself, in this manner peculiar to the *meant*, its particular *cogitatum*. Each does this, moreover, in its own fashion. The house-perception means a house — more precisely, as this individual house — and means it in the fashion peculiar to perception; a house-memory means a house in the fashion peculiar to memory. ... Conscious processes are also called *intentional*; but then the word intentionality signifies nothing else than this universal fundamental property of consciousness: to be consciousness of something; as a *cogito*, to bear within itself its *cogitatum*. (Husserl 1977: 33)

While Husserl says that it is the thinking being that intends the object, Benjamin insists that the intentional process occurs exclusively in language: every statement is a statement of something. That there is meaning, however, does not entail that there is a *subject* of language. It

is the act of meaning that produces the object, but it is not the cogito that performs the act of meaning. Hence one of the tasks of the philosophy to come, as Benjamin envisions it in his 1918 ‘Program of the coming philosophy’, is to trace the intentional process back to a transcendental consciousness that is not a ‘consciousness’ at all:

All genuine experience rests upon the pure ‘epistemological (transcendental) consciousness’, if this term is still usable under the condition that it be stripped of everything subjective. The pure transcendental consciousness is different in kind from any empirical consciousness, and the question therefore arises of whether the application of the term ‘consciousness’ is allowable here. (1996: 104)

Where there is no ‘empirical consciousness’, there can be neither ‘sensory impressions’ nor a ‘sound pattern’ representing them to cognition. And where there is language but no subject of language, it is language itself that intends its object. But where in the linguistic field does the act of intention take place? Benjamin emphasizes that the ground of intentional immediacy lies neither in the concept — since ‘[t]he relation of the concept to the object is not intentional, but a relation of derivation’ — nor in the statement — since ‘[s]tatements are not intentions in themselves either, but objects, sentences in themselves’ (1996: 89). Nor, according to the fragment ‘The object: Triangle’, is the sign an act of intention: ‘The sign never refers to the object, because it contains no intention, whereas the object is accessible only to an intention’ (1996: 90). The possibility of intention resides exclusively in the name:

By the power of names words have their intention towards objects: they participate in objects through names. The name does not exist in them in pure form, but is bound to a sign (see under IV [above there is a ‘IV’ that reads: ‘IV word: triangle’]). The name is the analogue of the knowledge of the object in the object itself. The object divides into name and essence. The name is supra-essence; it signifies the relation of the object to its essence. (?) (1996: 90, emphasis added)

Benjamin replaces the doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign with a law of participation. The relation between the word and object is not arbitrary because they are folded together by a name that is immanent in both of them. Words do not adopt an intention toward all objects, therefore, but only toward the ones that contain names: ‘The language has words only for those objects within which names lie concealed’ (1996: 90). Nameless objects belong to a sphere that Benjamin, in ‘Goethe’s elective affinities’, names ‘the expressionless’ (1996: 340–341). They mark the interruption, or caesura, of knowledge, just as, in the passage cited

above, Benjamin's parenthetical question mark records the instant when the theory of the name interrupts itself.

To grasp the theory of participation it is necessary to recall that for Benjamin the name draws its power from mimesis. What the word says about the object imitates what the object says about itself, and what it says, moreover, is the name. The name is that part of the object, its self-knowledge, that finds itself reflected in the word: 'The name is the analogue of the knowledge of the object in the object itself'. The word can only enter into a relationship with an object that resembles it, for as Benjamin explains in 'The concept of criticism in German Romanticism', 'every being knows only what is like itself, and is known by beings that are like it' (1996: 145). If we are capable of knowing things, it is because things are capable of imitating us, just as the word communicates only what is similar to itself: the name. But it is not just people who think about things. 'Everything that is in the absolute, everything real, thinks', says Benjamin, and because everything thinks, knowledge about things reflects what things know about themselves: 'All knowledge is self-knowledge of a thinking being, which does not need to be an "I"' (1996: 144–145). For, just as we find ourselves reflected in things we know, things recognize themselves in their knowledge of other things:

It is not only persons who can expand their knowledge through intensified self-knowledge in reflection; so-called natural things can do so as well. In their case, the process has an essential relation to what is commonly called their 'being-known'. That is, the thing, to the extent that it intensifies reflection within itself and includes other beings in its self-knowledge, radiates its original self-knowledge onto these other beings. In this way, too, the human being can *participate* in this self-knowledge of other beings. (1996: 146, emphasis added)

To know a thing is to participate in the knowledge it turns towards itself, and participation, which is the 'absence of relation', merges the subject of knowledge, which is not necessarily a human being, with the object known:

Accordingly, everything that presents itself to man as his knowledge of a being is the reflex in him of the self-knowledge of the thinking in that very being. Thus, there exists no mere being-known of a thing; just as little, however, is the thing or being limited to a mere being-known through itself. Rather the intensification of reflection in *it suspends the boundary that separates its being-known by itself from its being-known by another; in the medium of reflection, moreover, the thing and the knowing being merge into each other*. Both are only relative unities of reflection. Thus, there is in fact no knowledge of an object by a subject. Every instance of knowing is an immanent connection in the absolute, or, if one prefers, in the subject. The term 'object' designates not

a relation within knowledge but an absence of relation. (1996: 146, emphasis added)

Instead of discovering something new about the object, knowledge intensifies what the object already knows about itself: ‘no knowledge is possible without the self-knowledge of what is to be known’ (1996: 147). Knowledge is the reflection, in the subject, of the object’s reflection of itself: **the reflection of a self-reflection**.

The ‘highest application’ of this ‘capacity for recognizing the similar’ is language (p. 697). Indeed, for ‘modern human beings’, language is all that remains of a mimetic faculty that once thrived among ‘the ancients’ and continues to thrive among certain unnamed ‘primitive peoples’, ‘For clearly’, says Benjamin, in ‘The doctrine of the similar’,

the perceptual world [*Merkwelt*] of modern human beings seems to contain far fewer of those magical correspondences than did that of the ancients or even that of primitive peoples. The question is simply: Are we dealing with a dying out of the mimetic faculty, or rather perhaps with a transformation that has taken place within it? Of the direction in which the latter might lie, some indications could be derived, even if indirectly, from astrology. As researchers into old traditions, we must take account of the possibility that sensuous shape-giving took place — meaning that objects had a mimetic character — where we are today no longer capable even of suspecting it. For example, in the constellations of the stars. (p. 695)

‘Clearly’ here Benjamin’s theory of the mimetic faculty lapses into primitivism: it is a residue of an era when it was the joint project of anthropology, missionary education, and colonial administration to conjure up the specter of the primitive in almost every region of the globe in order to justify the scramble for conquest and colonization. He convokes this specter, however, not to deplore, once again, that primitive people are not as civilized as ‘modern human beings’, but to demonstrate that ‘modern human beings’ are not as primitive as a properly revolutionary politics requires them to be.

The mimetic faculty is a capacity for perceiving similarities that, paradoxically, are not perceptible to the senses. Benjamin calls them ‘nonsensuous similarities’ and defines them by turning the reader’s gaze to the stars:

The reference to astrology may ... suffice to make comprehensible the concept of a nonsensuous similarity. This concept is, obviously enough, a relative one: it indicates that we no longer possess in our perception whatever once made it possible to speak of a similarity which might exist between a constellation of stars and a human. Yet we, too, possess a canon, on whose basis we can attain

more clarity regarding the obscurity which clings to the concept of nonsensuous similarity. And that canon is language. (p. 696)

Because it is a system of imperceptible similarities, language is also an accumulation of forces, for, according to the fragment ‘On astrology’, mimesis itself is a ‘force’ operating in the interior of things that resemble each other. It is therefore possible to affirm ‘that not only are these resemblances imported into things by chance comparisons on our part, but that all of them — like the resemblances between parents and children — are the effects of an active, mimetic force working expressly inside things’ (p. 684). The language of things is a deployment of forces. But where in its interior do these forces set to work?

A word, whether spoken or written, ‘intends’ only what it resembles. In these fragments on mimesis, however, what imitates the word in the object is not the name but the sound. Sound is here the basis of the word’s participation in the object, and the object’s participation in the word, for Benjamin speculates that language grew out of a mimetic core where words first began to mimic the sounds of objects. While, for Saussure, onomatopoeic words are marginal forms in a system of arbitrary relations between sound-patterns and concepts, for Benjamin, onomatopoeia is the origin of languages, though this is not his only account of how language began:

From time immemorial, the mimetic faculty has been conceded some influence on language. But this was done without foundation — without serious consideration of a further meaning, still less a history, of the mimetic faculty. Above all, such considerations remained closely tied to the commonplace (sensuous) realm of similarity. All the same, imitative behavior in language formation was acknowledged as an onomatopoeic element. Now, if language, as is evident, is not an agreed-upon system of signs, we will be constantly obliged to have recourse to the kind of thoughts that appear in their rawest, most primitive form as the onomatopoeic mode of explanation. The question is whether this can be developed and accommodated to an improved understanding.

In other words, the question is whether one can establish an underlying meaning for Rudolf Leonhard’s assertion in his instructive work, *Das Wort* [The Word]: ‘Every word — indeed, the whole language — is onomatopoeic’. The key which finally makes this thesis fully transparent lies concealed in the concept of a nonsensuous similarity. For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their center, we have to inquire how they all — while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another — are similar to the signified at their center. (p. 696)

The relation between word and thing is not established by convention — is not ‘agreed-upon’ — because words remain linked to objects that, at

the origin, were like them. Yet Benjamin notes that ‘this magical aspect of language’, the participation of the word in the object, ‘does not develop in isolation from its other, semiotic aspect. Rather, everything mimetic in language is an intention which can appear at all only in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language’ (p. 697). As he explains in ‘The mimetic faculty’, a revised version of ‘The doctrine of the similar’, the semiotic is the ‘bearer’ of mimesis in language: ‘the mimetic element can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element. Thus, the nexus of meaning of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears’ (p. 722). **Words make sense, but the task of sense is not so much to communicate information about objects, as to provoke the recognition of the similarity between objects and words, for without the recognition of similarities, nothing can be known.** If still, today, a word adopts an intention towards an object, it is because every word means only what is like itself and every object is meant only by words that are like it.

Just as there can be no knowledge without a faculty for perceiving resemblances between the one who knows and the one who is known, so there would be no reading without the capacity for recognizing the similarity between what is said and what is meant. A survival of the ‘primitive’ in the ‘modern’, reading preserves a lost capacity for perceiving the similarity between people and stars. Hence reading is perception, and perception, reading:

If, at the dawn of humanity, this reading of stars, entrails, and coincidences was reading per se, and if it provided mediating links to a newer kind of reading, as represented by runes, then one might well assume that this mimetic gift, which was earlier the basis for clairvoyance, very gradually found its way into language and writing in the course of a development over thousands of years, thus creating for itself in language and writing the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity. In this way, language is the highest application of the mimetic faculty — a medium into which the earlier perceptual capacity for recognizing the similar had, without residue, entered to such an extent that language now represents the medium in which objects encounter and come into relation with another. (p. 697)

When Benjamin restates this conclusion in ‘On the mimetic faculty’— which of course has a mimetic relation to ‘On the doctrine of the similar’ — he suggests that **this faculty for recognizing similarities is magical:** ‘In this way, language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production

and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic' (p. 722). Since the intersection of language and magic overlaps two incompatible modes of time, the ancient and the modern, language is magic's fate. Yet language 'liquidates' magic without sublating it. It does not lift magic higher on a vertical scale of historical progress, but instead displaces magic from one point to another on a horizontal axis. If language is a survival of magic, then to speculate on language constitutes a criticism, or rather a critique, of magic. It is magical critique, or, as Benjamin's translators put it, magical 'criticism'. To the extent that his philosophy of language resembles magic, moreover, it mimics the processes of primitive thought.

In 'False criticism', a 1930 outline of a book never written, Benjamin foresees a 'final section' organized around five 'theses'. The fifth thesis deals with 'the technique of magical criticism' but leaves 'magical' undefined (p. 408). Another fragment from the same period, 'Criticism as the fundamental discipline of literary history', identifies 'Magical criticism as a manifestation of the highest stage of criticism' (p. 415). Benjamin leaves this claim undeveloped, but goes on to oppose magical critique to judgment: 'The whole critique of materialist literary criticism turns on the argument that it lacks a "magical", nonjudging side — that it always (or almost always) gets to the bottom of the mystery' (p. 416). The assertion that magical critique does not judge suggests it is a mode of action rather than a way of knowing, performative rather than constative. Magical critique is not limited to the purely 'semiotic' element of language; instead of mediating between thought and things, it bears a force that participates in things. This participation makes magical critique 'primitive' according to a definition of the primitive that was already canonical by the time Benjamin entered university.

The following selection from the discourse of primitivism outlines the series of resemblances in which magic merges with participation, and participation with the primitive. Walter Lehmann, in his introduction to *The Art of Old Peru*, describes several examples of 'polychrome pottery' from a city plundered by Spanish colonists in the sixteenth century. Some of these pieces are painted with geometrical designs, others with 'naturalistic' patterns, such as the figures of plants and animals. There are also a number of three-dimensional clay vessels crafted to resemble 'decapitated heads'. Lehmann says that these clay heads are imitations — or resemblances — of 'actual head-trophies' but he argues that they are intended not to reproduce the likeness of 'actual heads', but to communicate the power of the one who has died: 'the purpose of the representations of plants, animals, and head-trophies must not be thought of as purely decorative. Holding the head-trophy in

the hand, one absorbs the strength of the slain man' (1924: 30). The clay imitation of a person or thing carries within it a mimetic force associated with the person or thing imitated. What makes a work of mimesis 'primitive', then, is the power that it communicates to the viewer. One of the 'most faithful participants' in Walter Lehmann's course at the University of Munich in 1915 was Walter Benjamin (Brodersen 1996: 81–82).

A canonical statement of the claim that 'primitives' believe there are forces in things, especially in something that imitates something else, can be found in Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, published in 1910, when Benjamin was composing his first works in poetry and prose, and translated into English under the title *How Natives Think*. For Lévy-Bruhl's primitives, as for Walter Benjamin, the relation between the world of things and the sphere of representation is governed by a law of participation. Lévy-Bruhl argues that primitive ideas — he calls them 'representations' — such as magic, totem, and taboo — arise from the reasoning of groups, not from the thought-processes of an individual mind. Because they are collective, primitive representations have their own laws and cannot be measured against 'the laws of a psychology based upon the analysis of the individual subject' (1985: 13). An individual representation is an act of cognition, such as knowing or judging, but a collective representation combines cognition with emotion. This is a classic stereotype: the civilized individual keeps reason separate from feeling, while the primitive collective thinks and feels at the same time — like a child, or, in a variation of the same topos, like a woman. While the individual representation, such as the linguistic sign, is said to bring 'an image or idea of an object' before cognition, the collective representation is said to fuse the idea of an object with the motor force of 'passions which evoke [this idea] or are evoked by [it]' (1985: 36). Because it is rational, the individual representation communicates what is known about things; because it mixes reason with passion, the collective representation projects human feelings onto objects of knowledge. That collective emotions mingle objects of perception is, for Lévy-Bruhl, the basis of primitive thought.

Since emotion is a force tending toward action, rather than contemplation, when the collective mixes thought with feelings, it perceives inanimate objects to be animated by motor powers. Considered as a class, collective representations

express, or rather imply, not only that the primitive actually has an image of the object in his mind, and thinks it real, but also that he has some hope or

fear connected with it, that some definite influence emanates from it, or is exercised upon it. This influence is a virtue, an occult power which varies with objects and circumstances, but is always real to the primitive and forms an integral part of his representations. (1985: 37–38)

Collective representations are not only a mode of knowledge but a form of action, and because they attribute powers to objects, Lévy-Bruhl defines such representation as ‘mystic’, though not, he insists, in the ‘religious’ sense of ‘mysticism’:

If I were to express in one word the general peculiarity of the collective representations which play so important a part in the mental activity of undeveloped peoples, I should say that this mental activity was a *mystic* one. In default of a better, I shall make use of this term — not referring thereby to the religious mysticism of our communities, which is something entirely different, but employing the word in the strictly defined sense in which ‘mystic’ implies belief in forces and influences and actions which, though imperceptible to sense, are nevertheless real. (1985: 38, second emphasis added)

The mystic ‘forces’ embodied in collective representations are at once ‘real’ and, to use Benjamin’s term, nonsensuous. Lévy-Bruhl says his primitives perceive them even in the most banal, everyday objects:

A road, like everything else, has its own mystic properties. The natives of Loango say of an abandoned path that it is ‘dead’. To them, as to us, such an expression is metaphorical, but in their case it is fraught with meaning. For the path, ‘in active existence’, has its secret powers, like houses, weapons, stone, clouds, plants, animals, and men — in short, like everything of which the primitive has a group idea. (1985: 43)

Mystic forces are active not only in the object, moreover, but in whatever resembles it, such as its image. The life-forces of people, for example, participate in the very material that the image is made of: ‘primitives, even members of communities which are already somewhat advanced, regard artificial likenesses, whether painted, carved, or sculptured, as real, as well as the individual they depict’ (1985: 46). The thing communicates itself in its likeness, which is ‘as real’ as the thing itself. The likeness does not stand in for what it imitates; it participates in what it imitates. The thing contains its likeness, and the likeness, the thing, for both contain a force that is communicated along the pathway of mimesis.

Thus ‘how natives think’, according to Lévy-Bruhl, can be reduced to a single principle, which he names ‘the law of participation’. Although ‘it would be difficult to formulate this law in abstract terms’, since

it manifests itself in a material communication between things, it is, nevertheless, possible 'to approximate it' as follows:

in the collective representations of primitive mentality, objects, beings, phenomena can be, though in a way incomprehensible to us, both themselves and something other than themselves. In a fashion which is no less incomprehensible, they give forth and they receive mystic powers, virtues, qualities, influences, which make themselves felt outside, without ceasing to remain where they are. (1985: 76–77)

When primitives think, they do not hesitate to affirm that things have souls, or that dreams are real, or the inanimate animate. The logic of cultures set beyond the perimeter of Europe needs no further elaboration: 'the distant souls of the past', says Benjamin in his 1926 'Review of Bernouilli's *Bachofen*', as if the validity of such insight were self-evident, 'form the world in which the primitives, whose consciousness is comparable to the dream consciousness of modern man, can receive their perceptions' (1996: 427).

Just as, in the likeness sketched by Lévy-Bruhl, the primitive mind perceives living forces in things that the civilized mind considers dead, Benjamin finds in 'dead' things — above all, in the elements of the bourgeois interior — an explosive and potentially revolutionary energy of which 'the European' bourgeois remains unconscious. There is a passage in *The Arcades Project*, for example, in which Benjamin provides the following commentary on a book that claims that the soul of the collector 'participates' in the object collected:

The collector actualizes latent archaic representations of property. These representations may in fact be connected with taboo, as the following remark indicates: 'It ... is ... certain that taboo is the primitive form of property. At first emotively and "sincerely", then as a routine legal process, declaring something taboo would have constituted a title. To appropriate to oneself an object is to render it sacred and redoubtable to others; it is to make it "participate" in oneself'. [Quoted from N. Guterman and H. Lefebvre, *La Conscience mystifiée* 1936: 228]. (1999: 209–210)

The notion of 'taboo' or tabu or tapu is a variation, in the discourse of primitivism, on the law of participation. There is said to be taboo wherever a person's power, or soul, participates in his or her belongings. Anyone who tampers with these things risks arousing the power lurking within them. Hence they are 'taboo'.

What Benjamin is suggesting in his commentary on this passage from Guterman and Lefebvre is that the power that renders personal belongings taboo is an 'archaic' form of the 'civilized' law guaranteeing

the enjoyment of private property: primitives fear the forces of things, just as the civilized fear the police, courts, and prisons. When a collector takes possession of an 'object' that used to belong to someone else, it is protected by a renewed taboo, because it harbors a 'mystic' power that participates in the collector's very essence. Benjamin numbers Karl Kraus among those civilized collectors who have learned the primitive art of 'appropriating' the souls of the things by imitating them. In a review of Kraus's public reading of Offenbach's *La vie parisienne*, Benjamin suggests that the taboo on objects cannot harm Kraus because he knows how to make objects part of himself and himself part of objects. It is as if a puppeteer had appropriated the puppet's soul: 'In this respect he can only be compared to a puppeteer. It is here, not in the style of the operetta star, that his mimicry and his gestural language have their origin. For the soul of the marionette has entered his hands' (p. 111). To propitiate the forces in things, it is necessary to become like them, for as Benjamin remarks in his review of the 1927 edition of Gottfried Keller's collected works, things communicate with people by imitating them. Hence '[w]hat fills Keller's books is the sensuous pleasure not of gazing but of describing. Describing is sensuous pleasure because the object returns the gaze of the observer, and every good description captures the pleasure with which two gazes seek each other out and find one another' (p. 56). Before we turn our gaze to things, things are looking for us, because if things did not 'seek' the gaze seeking them, it would be impossible for people to find them.

According to Lévy-Bruhl, the law of participation not only fuses things with the people who own them, but makes people merge with the names they bear. He says that while 'to us' the name is 'label' that distinguishes one thing from another, to primitives the name 'expresses and makes real' the interrelatedness of people, things, and powers (1985: 53). Things communicate themselves in names, just as they communicate their powers from likeness to likeness: 'primitives regard their names as something concrete and real, and frequently sacred' (1985: 50). The power of the name is therefore similar to the power of similarities. 'The reality of the similitude', says Lévy-Bruhl, 'is of the same kind as the original — that is, essentially mystic, and it is the same with the reality of the name' (1985: 52). Just as a likeness imitates an original, the name resembles the thing named. 'The two cases are alike except in one point', he adds, 'that which appeals to the sight in the first case [the similitude], appeals to the hearing in the second [the name], but otherwise the process is identical. The mystic properties in the name are not separated from those in the beings they connote' (1985: 52–53). The name is 'identical' to the likeness, an imitation of imitation itself, for,

like the likeness, the name participates in the mystic powers of the thing named.

Benjamin mimics the claim that language participates in things in his comments on Hermann Güntert's *Von der Sprache der Götter und Geister* [*On The Language of Gods and Men*]. These comments appear in the 1921 fragment 'Language and logic' (1996). Benjamin cites a passage in which Güntert rehearses the claim that the name communicates mystic forces because 'it is not separated from the forces in the beings it connotes':

In olden times the reputation of the priest and magician, the medicine man and shaman, was based in large measure on his knowledge and understanding of the formulas and [magic] words of the spirit language, and this higher 'knowledge' was almost everywhere an anxiously kept secret; druids, brahmans, and shamans all understood exactly the basis of their own power. (1996: 274)

As if to show that he considers this passage to be a good definition of magical language, Benjamin adds the word 'magic' to the original text. As he proceeds to comment on this quotation, Benjamin does not reject the claim that there is power in certain utterances, but rather gauges the possibility of supplanting magic with logic:

Nothing would justify describing such linguistic knowledge as a mere agglomeration of magic formulas. On the contrary, the power of these formulas was guaranteed by a knowledge, a theoretical knowledge, which is tied to language. That a pure type of knowledge beyond the depths of magic can exist in truth as a system remains to be proved by an understanding of the relations of language and logic. (1996: 274)

After adding this critique, Benjamin cites a sentence in which Güntert mimics the arguments of Lévy-Bruhl: 'In olden times in particular, names and words are something like a spiritual substance, at all events something real, actual, existing, something that was felt to have the same value as body and soul' (1996: 274). There is no commentary.

In 1927, Benjamin locates the power of words not in the utterances of 'druids, brahmans, and shamans', but in the language of pornography. The direction of Benjamin's magical critique is by now familiar. **He claims the language of pornography participates in, and therefore resembles, the things it describes; thus it is language itself, and not only what it says, that is obscene.** 'In one respect', he argues, 'pornographic books are like other books: they are all based on language and writing. If language did not contain elements that are obscene in themselves, pornography would be robbed of its best instruments. Where do such words come from?' (p. 72) What makes words themselves 'obscene' even outside the

context of pornography, is that they carry an 'excess' of 'energy'. The source of their power is 'the striving for instant, unambiguous communication through a liberating, suggestive mode of expression' (p. 72). Because they aim at immediate — hence 'instant' — communication, the forces stored in words are magical, for it has already been shown that immediacy, for Benjamin, is magic's definitive trait:

But, one might object, if the production of such words is so grounded in the nature of language that all words which lecherously indulge in the excesses of communicative energy already find themselves on the boundaries of the obscene, then it is all the more important to banish them from writing.

On the contrary. It is society's duty to put these natural — not to say profane — processes in the life of language into service as natural forces. Just as Niagara Falls feeds power stations, in the same way the downward torrent of language into smut and vulgarity should be used as a mighty source of energy to drive the dynamo of the creative act. (p. 73)

Since the language of pornography embodies a 'not inconsiderable source of power', Benjamin proposes that its energies be enlisted in the service of the state (p. 73). It should be socialized rather than censored. But what service will this Niagara provide, and what creative act will it generate? The answer is that it will propel Europe towards an awakening.

Alarm clock

In the preface to the English translation, Lévy-Bruhl says that his theories too have served the public good. They have, above all, been 'of service' to missionaries and colonial administrators: 'those whose official functions, or vocations, bring them into constant relations with primitives' (1985: 5). He styles the anthropologist as the executive assistant of colonization. Benjamin, in contrast, conjures up the specter of the primitive neither to condemn it, nor to advise those whose job is to civilize it, but to imitate it. Magical critique answers his own call for a new primitivism or, as he puts it in 'Experience and poverty', a 'new barbarism'.

It is one of the dialectical contradictions of capitalist production, he argues in this 1933 essay, that not only does the 'tremendous development of technology' not augment the reserves of human experience, but it in fact depletes them. Nothing in the experience of previous generations equips modernity to interpret the social forms brought forth by an unprecedented expansion of the means of production and

destruction: 'For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare, economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers' (p. 732). By stripping 'modern human beings' of everything they thought they knew about the world, the development of technology, in Benjamin's view, returns them to the status of those half-naked savages who once crowded the colonial fantasies of Europe. For Benjamin, however, it is good to go barbarian because, to interpret new possibilities of being, experience has to begin again 'from scratch':

Indeed (let's admit it), our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence a new kind of barbarism.

Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right. (p. 732)

If the philosophy of language is to supply a newly impoverished Europe with a way of experiencing new social forms, where must it make its new start? Echoing Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Benjamin says that the task of language is no longer to collect information about the world but to transform it: 'No technical renovation of language, but its mobilization in the service of struggle or work — at any rate, of changing reality instead of describing it' (p. 733). If language has the power to change reality, though, it is because words and names participate in the energies of things. They open an avenue for a redistribution of powers.

To politicize his critique of language, Benjamin begins from scratch right where he used to be. He translates the language of description into a language of transformation not by developing the ideas left unfinished in his early writings, but by actualizing the forces already slumbering within them. Benjamin had already argued, in 'On language as such and on the language of man', that at the origin language itself was a means of production, for it was the word that created the world. Only later did a fallen, diminished language assume the lesser task of describing what it had created. The fall of language survives in the 'bourgeois conception of language', which defines the linguistic sign as a vehicle bearing data from the mind of a speaker to the ear of a hearer: 'It holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being' (1996: 65). To supplant this

bourgeois notion, Benjamin advances a critique of language that 'knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication' (1996: 65). If it is assumed that words correspond to thoughts and thoughts correspond to things, then, for Benjamin, language neither refers to things nor evokes what is thought, and because language has 'no speaker' — 'if this means someone who communicates *through* these languages' — it is not a means by which someone represents something to someone else (1996: 63). Whatever is communicable, says Benjamin, communicates itself in language. Benjamin emphasizes the 'in' of this 'in language': whatever is communicable 'communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language' (1996: 63). Language does not seek out an adequate correspondence between thought and thing — does not mediate between them — for what it communicates is language itself, not something other than itself.

Every event and every thing, 'animate or inanimate', partakes of language, for 'it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents' (1996: 62–63). All that is communicable in a mental being, however, is its linguistic being. Hence language communicates 'the linguistic being of things' (1996: 63). 'The answer to the question "*What does language communicate?*"' says Benjamin, 'is therefore "All language communicates itself"' (1996: 63), yet, paradoxically, to say that what communicates itself in language is language itself, does not 'even have the appearance' of a tautology. It is, instead, **magical**:

Whatever is communicable *of* a mental entity, *in* this it communicates itself. Which signifies that all language communicates itself. Or, more precisely, that all language communicates itself *in* itself; it is in the purest sense the 'medium' of the communication. Mediation, which is the immediacy of all communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic. (1996: 64)

Again, it is its immediacy that makes language magical, and what makes language immediate is that words and names participate in things instead of referring to them. Since there is no mediation between language and reality, language is, impossibly, or rather magically, an immediate medium of mediated immediacy. In language, to borrow Benjamin's phrase, 'it is a matter of mediation through immediacies' (1996: 126). He collapses the distinction between the form and the content of language: '*There is no such thing as a content of language; as communication, language communicates a mental entity — something communicable per se*' (1996: 66). This kind of compression is characteristic of his thought.

Like Adam, the first philosopher, Benjaminian man communicates his mental being, which 'insofar as it is communicable' is his linguistic

being, is ‘by *naming* all other things’ (1996: 64). Only in the name does language itself communicate itself absolutely, yet only where mental being overlaps linguistic being absolutely — so that ‘mental being in its communication is language itself in its absolute wholeness’ — is there the name — and, this point is crucial for Benjamin’s critique of the bourgeois conception of language, ‘only the name is there’ (1996: 65). Language communicates itself ‘without residue’ in the name alone, which is not the sign of a thing, but its completion. ‘Only through the linguistic being of things can [man] get beyond himself and attain knowledge of them — in the name. God’s creation is completed when things receive their names from man, from whom in name language alone speaks’ (1996: 65). Such is the immediacy of the immediate linguistic medium: only by being in language does Benjaminian man ‘get beyond’ his linguistic being. He does not communicate himself *through* it, but only *in* it, for it compresses the speaker into what is spoken.

That the name communicates the linguistic being of man without residue: ‘On this is founded the difference between human language and the language of things’ (1996: 65). Though things speak to each other, they do so silently, but in a silence that is also magical. ‘Things are denied the pure formal principle of language — namely, sound. They can communicate to one another only through a more or less material community. This community is immediate and infinite, like every linguistic communication; it is magical (for there is also a magic of matter)’ (1996: 67). The ‘material community’ of things is Benjamin’s translation of Lévy-Bruhl’s law of participation. If the community of matter is able to communicate itself in language, that is because language participates in matter. The force, or ‘spirit’, of things in language is absolutely similar to ‘the spirit of language in things’ (1996: 67). Because the participation of spirits in things is imperceptible, however, ‘nature’ is afflicted with its ‘great sorrow’: speechlessness (1996: 72–73).

The language that nature, in its material community, speaks without speaking is the residue of the language of creation, which is the language of God. Benjamin draws a theory of the performative from the first chapter of Genesis:

[T]he rhythm by which the creation of nature (in Genesis 1) is accomplished is: Let there be — He made (created) — He named. In individual acts of creation (Genesis 1:3 and 1:11) only the words ‘Let there be’ occur. In this ‘Let there be’ and in the words ‘He named’ at the beginning and end of the act, the deep and clear relation of the creative act to language appears each time. With the creative omnipotence of language it begins, and at the end language, as it were, assimilates the created, names it. Language is therefore both creative and the finished creation; it is word and name. (1996: 68)

Benjamin opposes language as a creative act to the language of cognition. The same opposition underlies his call, in 'Poverty and experience', for a language that would change the world instead of describing it: the aim of such a language would not be to 'name' the experience of the past but, by uttering a 'word' that interrupts the progress of history, to actualize the present. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin names the mobilization of the performative forces of language 'historical materialism': 'historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself sharply from bourgeois habits of thought [including "the bourgeois" — and exclusively constative — "conception of language"]. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization' (1999: 460).

In Genesis, God brings nature into being by uttering a truly performative word — one of those rare utterances where saying makes it so — yet, instead of creating man from the word, he breathes the word into him: 'in man God set language, which had served *him* as medium of creation, free. God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge' (1996: 68). While the word had the power to create nature, human language is 'only the reflection of the word in name' (1996: 68); and while the word is infinite and creative, the name is limited and analytic: it can say what it knows but it cannot do what it says.

In paradise, the name participated in the name, and things participated in each other, because both the language of man and the language of things participated in the 'creative word' of God: 'the name-language of man and the nameless language of things [were] related in God and released from the same creative word, which in things became the communication of matter in magic communion, and in man the language of knowledge and name in blissful mind' (1996: 70). Speaking a language 'of perfect knowledge', Adam gave voice to the mute language of things without mediation. Only after he tasted the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil did mediation enter the world. As language lapsed from the paradise of immediate participation and immanent magic, the name 'stepped outside itself' into a fallen state of exteriority and imitation:

Knowledge of good and evil abandons name; it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word. Name steps outside itself in this knowledge: the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic, in order to become expressly, as it were externally, magic. (1996: 71)

Just as creation brings language down from the heights of the divine word to the created name, the fall brings the created name down to the human word. It is after the Fall that language is condemned to communicate something other than itself.

Although God's word ceases to be creative even before the fall, the soundless language of things continues to bear the trace of the word that brought them into being. 'In name', Benjamin concedes, 'the word of God has not remained creative; it has become in one part receptive, even if receptive to language'; but when it is '[t]hus fertilized', he adds, 'it aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth' (1996: 69). If things could break their silence and name themselves in their own language, this impossible speech-act would ignite a still-glimmering power of verbal creativity: 'for the whole of nature, too, is imbued with a nameless, unspoken language, the residue of the creative word of God' (1996: 74).

One 'sphere' where a language of things supplants the language of names is the arts, for in art matter speaks with its own inaudible voice:

Just as the language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded on the name language of man, it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages, that in them we find a translation of the language of things into an infinitely higher language, which may still be of the same sphere. We are concerned here with nameless, nonacoustic languages, languages issuing from matter; here we should recall the material community of things in their communication. (1996: 73)

The languages of things 'issue from' 'matter' because they participate in it. What is communicated in their 'nonacoustic' form is the material being of things, for things are what they say. Thing-languages communicate the forces that murmur noiselessly — and magically — in the community of matter. Yet if these thing-languages were translated into a human language of names, it would not be possible to know things better, for only a fallen language speaks of something other than itself, but it might be possible to mobilize the forces stored in them. To awaken these forces is the work of revolution.

In the fragment 'On semblance', from 1919 or 1920, Benjamin suggests the work of art contains a living force which it is the artist's task to restrain. This force manifests itself at the intersection of 'beauty' and 'semblance', the two terms that organize 'Goethe's elective affinities'. On the scale of beautiful semblance, 'in an artifact of beautiful semblance, the semblance is all the greater the more alive it seems' (1996: 224). The living artifact is the outer limit of art, and though the work of art

may approach this limit, if it crosses it, it ceases to be art and becomes mere semblance instead. Art remains art to the extent that it interrupts the life quivering inside it, not quite alive. Benjamin's name for this life is beauty:

No work of art may appear completely alive without becoming mere semblance, and ceasing to be a work of art. The life quivering in it must appear petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment. The life quivering within it is beauty, the harmony that flows through chaos and — that only appears to tremble. What arrests this semblance, what holds life spellbound and disrupts the harmony, is the expressionless [*das Ausdrucklose*]. That quivering is what constitutes the beauty of the work; the paralysis is what defines its truth. (1996: 224)

Art is arrested force, life held in suspension, and though 'paralyzed', it nevertheless trembles. Understanding the life in created things is also the concern of the fragment 'Beauty and semblance', written at the same period. The fragment consists of three numbered sentences (1996: 283). Sentence I asserts that whatever is living is beautiful: 'Every living thing that is beautiful has semblance'. Sentence II says that art is beautiful only if it has semblance, but has semblance only if it is alive: 'Every artistic thing that is beautiful has semblance because it is alive in one sense or another'. Hence there are many 'senses' in which it is possible for something to be alive, including the sense in which art is a living thing. Sentence III divides the living from the dead and gathers the remains: 'There remain only natural, dead things which can perhaps be beautiful without having semblance'. While many things are beautiful, then, whatever has beauty without semblance is dead.

Although life lies at the fold between beauty and semblance, the work of art is alive only if it emerges where beauty and semblance interrupt each other. Art, however, conjures life up only to conjure it away, for if it did not, it would lapse into magic. Benjamin tests this argument in 'Goethe's elective affinities':

Conjuration intends to be the negative counterpart of creation. It, too, claims to bring forth a world from nothingness. With neither of them does the work of art have anything in common. It emerges not from nothingness but from chaos. ... Artistic creation neither 'makes' anything out of chaos nor permeates it; and one would be just as unable to engender semblance, as conjuration truly does, from elements of that chaos. ... Therefore, no work of art may seem wholly alive, in a manner free of spell-like enchantment, without becoming mere semblance and ceasing to be a work of art. The life undulating in it must appear petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment. (1996: 340)

Not only are the thing-languages of art not dead, but they must 'petrify' the life trembling within them if art is not to collapse into conjuration.

A reading of thing-languages that ranges beyond the sphere of art shows that the 'powers' in things are distributed throughout 'the social'. 'In its present state', says Benjamin in the fragment 'World and time', from 1919 or 1920, 'the social is a manifestation of spectral and demonic powers, often, admittedly, in their greatest tension to God, their efforts to transcend themselves'. Then he adds: 'The divine manifests itself in them only in revolutionary force' (1996: 227). The powers underlying the social acquire a revolutionary potential only when the divinity reveals itself in them: revolution is therefore the coming together of spirits and revelation. To prepare for the revolutionary manifestation of the divine, however, it is necessary to focus perception on language, especially the language of revelation: 'Such manifestations are to be sought not in the sphere of the social but in perception oriented towards revelation and, first and last, in language, sacred language above all' (1996: 227). Just as, in 'On language as such and on the language of man', it is the creative word of God that calls the world into being, so, in this fragment, the force that promises to transform the world that people have created bursts from the citation of the divine word.

Benjamin's thesis on the revolutionary deployment of divinity within spectral powers inverts Marx's canonical thesis on the fetishism of commodities: if, for Benjamin, the social is a form assumed by occult powers, for Marx, the powers invested in the commodity are an occulted form of the social. When commodities arrive on the market, they appear to have value in themselves, as if value were a spirit embodied in material things. Marx argues, however, that the value of a commodity measures the duration of abstract labor-power that the working class, which owns only its own labor, sells on the open market to the capitalist class, which owns the means of production, in return for the means of subsistence paid in wages:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. ... It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves [in which one class owns the means of work and another group sets them in motion but is paid only a fraction of the value created by labor] which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human

race. So it is in the world of commodities with the product of man's hands. (1977: 164–165)

For Benjamin, however, the objectification of labor-power in the commodity is a sub-category of a much broader production process that leaves behind a residue of divine power in the silent language of things. Commodities are nevertheless reservoirs of the labor-power that produced them, and this power is the avenue of their material communication. What is more, the critic who learns to speak the language of commodities participates in a force that can be mobilized 'in the service' of transforming reality.

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin cites a passage from Karl Korsch's book *Karl Marx*, where Korsch traces the similarity between Marx's theory of fetishism and his earlier theory of alienation. 'What Marx ... terms the "fetishism of the world of commodities"', writes Benjamin, citing Korsch, 'is only a scientific expression for the same thing that he had described earlier ... as "human self-alienation"' (1999: 662). According to Marx's classic statement of his theory of alienation, in the first of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, alienation occurs when labor confronts itself as a power embodied in the object it has produced:

the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labour is labour embodied and made material in an object, it is the *objectification* of labour. The realization of labour is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy this realization of labour appears as a *loss of reality* for the worker, objectification as *loss of and bondage to the object*, and appropriation as *estrangement, as alienation* [*Entäusserung*]. (1975: 324)

Face to face with the commodity, the worker experiences labor not as his or her own power, but as a power that participates in the material body of the created object. If alienation is to be overturned, it is necessary to reestablish the worker's participation in the object. What is required for a return to participation is restoring the material communication between worker and thing, a communication at once ruptured and mystified by the social relations of capitalist production. The material communication between worker and commodity would pass via the material power that both the commodity and the worker share — labor — for material communication is based on the recognition of similarities, and what workers and commodities recognize in each other is the force that labor communicates to things.

In the 1921 fragment, 'Capitalism and religion', Benjamin calls for a comparative study of the fetishism of paper money. Such a study

would attend to the language spoken by a 'spirit' embodied within the money-form. 'A comparison', he says, 'between the images of the saints of the various religions and the banknotes of different states. The spirit that speaks from the ornamental design of banknotes' (1996: 290). Marx had already made that comparison in the manuscripts of 1844: 'the *divine* power of money lies in its nature as the estranged and alienating *species-essence* of man which alienates itself by selling itself. It is the alienated *capacity of mankind*' (1975: 377). When the worker sells labor-power in return for wages, she or he brings into being an alien, objective world that steals life away from the living and stores it in things that the wages of labor cannot purchase. 'It is the same', says Marx,

in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains within himself. The worker places his life in the object, but now it no longer belongs to him, but to the object. The greater his activity, therefore, the fewer objects the worker possesses. What the product of his labor is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less he is himself. The externalization [*Entäußerung*] of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien. (1975: 324)

For those readers of things who have to learn the art of experience from scratch, Benjamin advocates a 'practical critique' of the bourgeois interior, for the home is a monad that contains, in reduced form, the occulted world of commodities and commodity production.

In 'The fireside saga', therefore, fetishism is a bourgeois rather than a primitive mode of perception, for the truly primitive culture is Europe's industrial bourgeoisie: imperialism's new barbarians. What Benjamin here names 'practical critique' is a proto-revolutionary practice aimed at liquidating the forces accumulated in things in the sensuous non-sensuous form of alienated labor.

The primal history of the nineteenth century, whose monuments have become ever more audible since the Surrealists, has been enriched by one further unforgettable document. One of the profoundest, most legitimate features of the new schools of architecture may well be seen in their efforts to liquidate the magical powers that we are inevitably and unconsciously subject to in the rooms and furniture of our dwellings. These efforts strive to transform us from the inhabitants of houses into their users, from proud owners into practical critics. (p. 152)

No one, adds Benjamin, has done more to advance the practical critique of the interior and the things crowded within it than the Surrealists. No wonder, then, that in 'Surrealism', he affirms that André

Breton, in particular, 'can boast an extraordinary discovery'. It is the 'revelation' that the 'energies' that participate in things are potentially revolutionary: a coming 'manifestation' of the 'divine':

He was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded' — in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution — no one can have a more exact concept of it than these authors. No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution — not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects — can suddenly be transformed into revolutionary nihilism. To say nothing of Aragon's *Passage de l'Opéra*, Breton and Nadja are the lovers who convert everything that we have experienced on mournful railway journeys (railways are beginning to age), on godforsaken Sunday afternoons in the proletarian neighborhoods of great cities, in the first glance through the rain-blurred window of a new apartment, into revolutionary experience, if not action. They bring the immense forces of 'atmosphere' concealed in these things to the point of explosion. (p. 210)

The task of practical critique is to make the interior explode by releasing the forces stored in the commodities brought home from the marketplace. To prime the explosion that annihilates the fetish by igniting its own compressed forces, critique puts politics in the place of history: '[t]he trick by which this world of things is mastered — it is more proper to speak of a trick than a method — consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past' (p. 210). Resorting to a banal phrase, Benjamin describes this substitution in *The Arcades Project* as a Copernican revolution in historical perception:

Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in 'what has been', and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal — the flash of awakened consciousness. Politics attains primacy over history. The facts become something that just now first happened to us, first struck us; to establish them is the affair of memory. Indeed, awakening is the great exemplar of memory: the occasion on which it is given us to remember what is closest, tritest, most obvious. (1999: 338–389)

Liberating the forces compressed in things requires the compression of the time of knowledge, for, under pressure, the past erupts in the present like a flash. The instant when the past arrives to interrupt the present is the 'now of knowability'. It stirs the slumbering collective from the dream-filled sleep of capitalist production, and transforms

the present into an experience of 'awakening'. What makes it possible to jolt the collective from its sleep, though, is that the capitalist dream accumulated a vast and explosive reserve of primitive or 'mythic' energies: 'Capitalism was a natural phenomenon', Benjamin adds, 'with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, the reactivation of mythic forces' (1999: 391). It is while dreaming that the practical critic learns the language of things and adopts towards commodities a relation of participation. 'The more frequently I return to these memories', recalls Benjamin in 'A Berlin chronicle',

the less fortuitous it seems to me how slight a role is played in them by people: I think of an afternoon in Paris to which I owe insights into my life that came in a flash, with the force of an illumination. ... I tell myself it had to be Paris, where the walls and quays, the asphalt surfaces, the collections and the rubbish, the railings and the squares, the arcades and the kiosks, teach a language so singular that our relations to people attain, in the solitude encompassing us in our immersion in that world of things, the depth of a sleep in which the dream image waits to show people their true faces. (p. 614)

In Benjamin's lexicon, the critic who looks things in the face, and learns to speak to them, is a physiognomist, for example E. T. A. Hoffman, who was 'not so much a seer as someone who looked at people and things. And that is quite a good definition of the term "physiognomy"' (p. 324).

The 'moral greatness' of the physiognomist Proust arises from 'the task' he made 'peculiarly his own' and pursued 'with a passion unknown in any previous writer'. It is the task 'of describing with unprecedented fidelity the things that have crossed our path. His fidelity to an afternoon, a tree, a stain from the sun on the wall; his fidelity to a gown, furniture, perfumes, or landscapes' (p. 346). Moral greatness, however, is not 'revolutionary action', for if by his comprehension of thing-languages, Proust leads the world to the instant that awakens it to a new life — 'Proust has brought off the monstrous feat of letting the whole world age a lifetime in an instant. But this very concentration, in which things that normally just fade and slumber are consumed in a flash, is called rejuvenation' (p. 244) — a rejuvenated world is not necessarily one free from alienation. Revolution, in contrast, is figured at the end of 'Surrealism' as an act of 'discharge' that releases the energies in things by folding together, in primitive fashion, the real with the ideal, matter with language, body with image. The name of this fold is technology, and it supplies a spasm that jolts the collective body towards its awakening:

Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily

innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*. For the moment, only the Surrealists have understood its present commands. They exchange, to a man, the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds. (pp. 217–218)

References

- Benjamin, Walter (1996). *Selected Writings. Volume One: 1913–1926*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- (1999). *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brodersen, Momme (1996). *Walter Benjamin: A Biography*, trans. by Malcolm R. Green and Ingrida Ligers. New York: Verso.
- Genet, Jean (1964). *The Thief's Journal*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman. New York: Grove Press.
- Husserl, Edmund (1977). *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. by Dorion Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Lehmann, Walter (ed.) (1924). *The Art of Old Peru*. New York: E. Weyhe.
- Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien (1985). *How Natives Think*, trans. by Lilian A. Clare. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Marx, Karl (1975). *Early Writings*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- (1977). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, trans. by Ben Fowkes. New York: Vintage Book.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de (1983). *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Roy Harris. La Salle, IL: Open Court.

Christopher Bracken (b. 1964) is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Alberta, Edmonton <chris.bracken@ualberta.ca>. His research interests include philosophy of language and literary theory. His major publications include *The Pottlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History* (1997) and 'The senses of Lacan' (forthcoming).