

## Drawing--The Single Trait

1.

Politics, in its theory and even more in its practice, has always tended to subordinate the singular to the general, generally by equating it with the particular, which, qua „part,“ already implies its dependency upon and subservience to a „whole.“ At the same time—a “time” that is first of all that of Western “modernity,” here defined as the period ushered in by the Reformation, the ensuing Wars of Religion and the Treaty of Westphalia (1641) and extending until today, “post-modernism” notwithstanding—(at the same time) theoreticians of “liberal democracy” have sought to justify the institution in which the Whole materializes itself politically: either juridically, as the nation-state, or morally, as “the people,” both in both cases as the indispensable condition both of the development of the individual and of its self-fulfillment. Nothing is more familiar than this claim, going back at least to Hobbes, and yet nothing is more enigmatic. For after all, what is a “self”?

In the Christian tradition out of whose crisis the political systems and strategies of “western modernity” develop, the self is generally conceived of as that which marks the ability of an individual to *stay the same over time*. In this sense, it is the secular aspect or manifestation of the “soul”. As property or attribute of an “individual,” the self thereby becomes humanized. For we—“we” here being especially English-speakers—can all too easily forget or overlook the fact that “an individual” does not have to be a human individual: it can be any entity that is understood to be in principle *in-divisible* and thereby *self-contained*. In short: *autonomous*. “We” can all too easily overlook this fact

because of our language. Or rather, because of what our language has become. In English the word “self” is almost inevitably associated with a person, and hence with a human being. This is not necessarily the case in other languages, for instance French or German. The “soi” in French, and the “Selbst” in German, need not refer primarily to human individuals. In French, despite the growing influence of Foucault’s lectures on the “soi de soi”—the care of oneself—the word “soi” has a more linguistic or logical than a referential or human significance. “Soi” designates a reflexive movement, in which something—not necessarily human—returns to that which it was, to its essence or its origin. Similarly, “*Selbst*” in German is by no means the simple equivalent of “self,” as indicated by its adverbial function, in which the word tends to refer not to the completion of an identity but to its limits: “*Selbst die Amerikaner...*”: “Even the Americans..”

But the fact that American English at least tends to privilege the association of “self” with the human individual is hardly pure accident. For although “self” as a reflexive marker need not refer only or primarily to human beings, a certain notion of reflexivity—of something returning to what it was—finds its exemplary articulation in the human individual, and this by virtue of a long but nevertheless delimitable tradition, which Heidegger has aptly designated as “onto-theological”<sup>1</sup>. If only a human can, in this tradition, be a law unto itself, it is because only human beings are construed as created in the image of a Being that is simply identical to itself. It is from this being that the world emerges and it is in its image that man is created. Human autonomy is the image of the self-identical being of the Creator.

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<sup>1</sup> I would be tempted to add the prefix “mono-“ to this designation: “onto-mono-theological”.

Thus, contrary to the opposition often supposed to define the relation of secular autonomy and religious heteronomy, the notion of autonomy and its association with man is in profound accord with the Biblical account of the Creation of the World through the Divine Logos. “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth,” and then “every living creature after his kind.” Each creature is thus created as an individual that is exemplary of a “kind,” instantiation of a genus or genre. The individual is indivisible in its essence because the latter is grounded in the “kind”—in the genre it exemplifies—which in turn reflects the self-identical structure of the Creator: God as One and as Self. In the monotheistic Creator-God individual and genus are absolutely One and the Same. In His Creation, all creatures are created in the image of such identity, which however is no longer immediate and absolute. Only man approaches such immediate self-identity of individual and genus. But this approach is not unequivocal: man is both singular and plural, splitting the story of creation into two versions just as he himself is split into man and woman, Adam and Eve. Both are man, which is to say members of a single genus. But that genus is split generically. And it is precisely that split that will seal the fate of “man”.

To begin with, however—and this beginning will determine both the *terminus ab quo* and *ad quem* of the “human”—man, made in the image of God, is the epitome of a self-hood that is grounded in the unity of the Creator and that therefore informs all creatures in the creation. As a world of selves, this Creation is already, in the beginning, ordered hierarchically. Man is created in the image of God to rule over all other creatures on Earth just as he in turn is ruled over by his Creator.

According to Genesis, in the beginning God created the living to live on and proliferate without limit. God's first words to the newly created man and woman link such proliferation and generation to domination:

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth and make it your subject and rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the cattle and all animals that move on Earth. (Moses I, 1. 28)

In the beginning, then, there was *Life without Death*, and time served to measure the space of such limitless life, marked by growth but not decay, fulfillment but not destruction. But the creation of the world as the space of unlimited life demands limitation if that life is to take place as the living—as living beings that are somehow individuated. It is not enough the Earth is defined by opposition to the Heavens, or to the Oceans—it too must be individuated, localized, turned into a place. Life is thus localized in and as the Garden of Eden, which God is said to “plant” rather than to “create” and in which he “sets” man. There is now an “inside” and hence necessarily also an outside, even if that outside at first has no other significance than to serve as the condition of the inside. This inside is a place of life as pure generation, a process marked by the growth of trees:

And God the Lord let all sorts of trees grow from the Earth, lovely to look at and good to eat, and the Tree of Life in the middle of the Garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. (Moses 1, 2. 9)

Two trees, in the center of the Garden, nourished by a river that “divides itself into four arms”. In this place, then, life generates and proliferates itself without limitation. Life, and human life in particular, is thus created to flourish without death. Death enters this

world of pure life only as the result of a particular human action—an act of disobedience. But the condition of possibility of such disobedience, and hence of the introduction of mortality into the world, is that a certain negativity be already present in the Garden of Eden. And it is precisely this that occurs immediately following the initial description of the Garden, when God addresses man as follows:

And God the Lord commanded man and spoke: Of all flowers in the garden thou may eat; only from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil shalt thou not eat; for as soon as thou should eat from it, thou shalt die. (I Moses, 2.16)

Freud writes somewhere (?) that where there are prohibitions, there must first be desires to prohibit. But how could there be a desire of the sort that God thus feels obliged to prohibit? For, as Walter Benjamin observes (in his 1916 essay on “Language...”), in the beginning everything that God had created as per se good: there was no evil. And hence, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil could have no purpose, no reason to be. Except perhaps that of standing in the shadow of its neighbor, the Tree of Life. Or conversely, that of casting its shadow over the other tree. Whatever its reason for being there, the sanction for violating the divine prohibition seems unequivocal: “For as soon as thou should eat from it, thou shalt die.” Read in view of what comes to pass, this “as soon as” is all the more striking, since Adam and Eve will not die immediately following their transgression. Death will only enter the Biblical account specifically much later, following another crime—this time that of fratricide. Cain will be the first person explicitly naming as suffering death, and he will suffer it once again as punishment for an act—a criminal act, if you will. Death will take time, will take its time—taking time out of the Garden of Eden and into the world outside. It will appear at first not as itself but as

a sentence to hard labor and suffering. Death takes its time—it is not present, not in the Garden of Eden and perhaps not afterwards. But it is there, somewhere outside, biding its time.

The Divine prohibition lays down the Law in the Garden of Eden. But if this law has no ostensible reason to be there, it has a function, a purpose: that of assigning guilt. The Divine prohibition marks the introduction of the Law, and with the Law, the possibility of guilt. Whoever eats of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil will be guilty. But guilty of what? And why should one want to eat of the forbidden tree, especially given that its “object”—the difference between Good and Evil—has no “purchase” in the Garden of Eden? The words with which the serpent tempts Eve contain perhaps a clue. The serpent tells Eve that “in the day ye eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” (1.5). To eat of the Tree of Knowledge would be to change the single Creator God into a Genus, “Gods”—“to be like gods”. To know that difference—to know difference per se?—is inevitably to transform the singularity of the Other into the similarity of a genre. The act of eating from the Tree of Knowledge already brings about this transformation. God responds to this act by pronouncing sentence on the transgressors, but not before acknowledging that He is no longer alone in his Divinity: In order to explain and perhaps also to justify the punishment He will mete out, God can no longer simply speak, as when he created the world: he must address others. And the only others who would be qualified to be so addressed in the first-person plural (assuming the translation is at all accurate) are precisely those he must punish for such hubris:

[22] ...And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us<sup>2</sup>, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever:

[23] Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

Labor thus is introduced as a form of punishment, a response to guilt and transgression. Work is death deferred—but only deferred. But beyond the content of the punishment, it is its enunciation that concerns us here. Whom does God so address, as he judges and condemns Adam and Eve for violating his prohibition and wanting to “become as one of us”? Who is this “us”? A “royal we”? In any case, their defining property is clear: they are immortal, exempt from death and from that labor to which man will be condemned as punishment for his guilty act. This act links the Tree of Knowledge to its neighbor in the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life. First one partakes of knowledge—and not just any knowledge but the knowledge of Good and Evil, which implies the relativization of Good through its linkage to Evil. And given the proximity of the Tree of Life, the same implication holds for Life, which is relativized by being linked to death. Henceforward Good will be linked to Evil as Life to Death. This linkage is depicted ambivalently: on the one hand as the result of human action, violating the Divine Law. And on the other the existence of that Law already presupposes not just the desire of humans to become immortal, like the gods, but also that to which such desire seeks to respond: death as enabling condition of (human) life. To know Good in relation to Evil opens the way to knowing Life in relation to Death and hence, as desiring life to be eternal.

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<sup>2</sup> But who is this “us” to and of whom “God” speaks? In what sense can the monotheistic Lord of the Creation entail a plurality? Only perhaps in the sense that to speak, even for a God that is One and the Same, is always to speak to others. This however clearly complicates the discourse of “mono-theism”.

It is only by acquiring the Knowledge that distinguishes Good from Evil that Life is distinguished from Death. Death imposes itself upon the Living, but as something to be overcome. But only by humans becoming like Gods. This is the consequence of eating of the Tree of Knowledge, at least in the mind and words of God. Man has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge—his next step is to try the Tree of Life. God responds however not be carrying out the death sentence promised in his interdiction, but rather to defer execution through exile, labor and return to the earth.

What this Biblical account demonstrates with clarity, notwithstanding its many ambiguities, is that in the mind of God the knowledge of Good and Evil is implicated in the relation of life to death. To know Good and Evil—which means to distinguish the one from the other but also to recognize their inseparability—is a first step in the desire to become divine, which means to shed mortality. But it is only a first step and as such it implies the recognition of mortality, if only as a preface to transcending it. And not only is it a first step—it is also a last step. For this step goes nowhere, if not *zugrunde*, back to the ground from which man was made. For such knowledge brings with it not only shame—the shameful awareness of man’s “nakedness”—but also, more importantly, guilt. In eating from the Tree of Knowledge man becomes guilty and thus deserving of punishment. Mortality is the name of that punishment, and work and suffering are its immediate manifestations. Death is not merely introduced into human life: it is justified as punishment for transgression. Man is mortal because he is guilty, and he is guilty because he has knowingly violated divine law.

Guilt plays an ambiguous role in this story. Man becomes mortal by virtue of his guilt, but his guilt is the result of his attempt to overcome mortality through his own action. But

this action is not “his”—and this not simply because it is “hers”. It is first of all a reaction, a response to the serpent’s assurances that to eat of the Tree of Knowledge will make Adam and Eve like unto God. At the same time, the guilt-producing transgression is in turn made possible only because “man” is not simply a unified or univocal genre but rather gendered, which is to say, split. It is Adam’s other, Eve, who is addressed by the serpent. Man’s other responds to the serpent and convinces Adam--“man”—to commit the fateful act. As gendered, the genus man is not alone, not self-identical, but already enmeshed in an uncanny gendered alterity. The unity of genre is broken by the divisibility of gender.

But if in this rendition disobedience emerges as the ultimate cause of death, then it stands to reason—i.e. to that reasoning which is based on equivalence, reciprocity and reversibility—that the restoration of obedience can perhaps undo the punishment provoked by its lack. If man is condemned to finitude as a result of his re-action, this condemnation itself might turn out to be potentially finite and as such amenable to transformation? In this sense, the “fall” is always potentially also fortunate: a *felix culpa*, wherein the Christian tradition, from Augustine to Aquinas and beyond has seen the negative condition of redemption.<sup>3</sup> If the desire to know brought about the fall, another kind of knowledge, called “faith,” can perhaps undo it in the end. If death came about through human action qua disobedience, might it not be overcome equally through

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<sup>3</sup> “The phrase is sung annually in the [Exsultet](#) of the Easter Vigil: “O felix culpa quae talem et tantum meruit habere redemptorem,” “O happy fault that merited such and so great a Redeemer.” The medieval theologian [Thomas Aquinas \[1\]](#) cited this line when he explained how the principle that “God allows evils to happen in order to bring a greater good therefrom” underlies the causal relationship between original sin and the Divine Redeemer’s [Incarnation](#). Other goods that followed from this fortunate fall were [Jesus Christ’s Second Coming](#) and [Last Judgment](#) and man’s eventual hope of [Heaven](#).” *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix\\_culpa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_culpa).

human action, as faithful obedience? Precisely this thought is uttered by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians:

For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” (Leviathan, ch. 38, p. 298 [239])

This passage, (as we have seen), is quoted by Hobbes in Chapter 38 of his *Leviathan*. It also explains the reason for the brief excursus we have just made. If, as I have tried to show previously [in the previous essay (chapter9)], *protection* is arguably the defining task that legitimates the nation state in modern political theory, and also practice, then this presupposes a question that is rarely asked although it informs most conceptions of politics: protection *from* what and *for* what? The beginnings of an answer, I suggest, can be found in the essentially Christian notion of the *fortunate fall*.

If death came into the world through the actions of man, it can be surmounted also through the same: it is this promise of salvation and of “resurrection” through action—modified to include another form of intentional activity, namely “faith”—that the modern Nation State, whether conceived of as a Leviathan or more liberally, as a consensual collective, is expected to secure. Homeland Security is thus to be achieved through protracted War against all the forces of death and destruction, beginning with man himself, defined as the “enemy.” In this light, the sovereign nation-state appears one the one hand as the heir of a Catholic Church whose universality had been decisively challenged by the Reformation; and on the other hand, as heir of the Reformation insistence on irreducible particularity, on the individual as locus of faith and hence of salvation. A nation-state is not a universal Church, although it appropriates the

monotheistic claim to universality, a claim that inevitably brings it into conflict with other equally particular, equally universalist nation-states as well as with other organized entities modeled upon the nation-state or its religious antecedents.

In the wake of the immensely destructive Thirty Years War, the modern system of nation-states sought through “international law”—or, as it is called in German: *Völkerrecht* (more literal translation of the Roman *ius gentium*) --to regulate the inevitable conflicts that emerged between particular political entities whose legitimation involved claims to universal validity that inevitably brought individual states into conflict with one another. The task that they inherited from the Church shifted from that of organizing “salvation” to that of assuring “safety.” (In French one word fits all, stressing their proximity even today: “*salut*”)<sup>4</sup> The *raison d’être* of the modern State is no longer directly eschatological or redemptive, but rather *protective*.<sup>5</sup> It seeks to *secure* the lives and livelihoods of its members. In the process it shifts the notion of “guilt” from a religious one—the original sin of Adam and Eve—to a moral and legal one, the “guilt” of those who violate the laws—laws presented as the condition of security and of protection, of public safety. Here again, the cause of guilt, in the legal sense, is bound up with intention. Just as original sin was brought into the world by an intentional act, a deliberate transgression, so juridical guilt is dependent upon intention. And what is the

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<sup>4</sup> For some of the valences of “salut,” see Jacques Derrida’s “Adieu—à Emmanuel Levinas” (Paris: Galilée, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> The current French Minister of Justice, Rachida Dati, has recently defended a law she has proposed that would mandate lifetime incarceration for criminals considered incorrigible—emulating the (in)famous Bush “3 Strikes” law--by asserting in an interview with *Le Monde* (27 February 2008) that “it is not playing with emotions to protect the French” (“Ce n’est pas de jouer avec l’émotion que de protéger les français”). She thereby echoes the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, who campaigned under the slogan of “protecting the French.”

result of intention, guilt, can be purged by intention: punishment, just as sin can be purged by penance or repentance. The goal of such penance or repentance, of such punishment, is to “redeem” the “guilt” of the living, qua individuals, by assuring the survival of the nation or people. The Christian promise of salvation devolves upon the political collective. But that collective is never simply present to itself: it always involves a promise, which is to say, the future. Faith in the future determines the future of faith. Hence also the importance of such collective nouns as *nation* and *people*: only as the member of such groups can the vulnerable and guilty individual hope to be “saved.”

Hence, the importance of the “nation”: it can secure a “state” that transcends the transience of finite living beings. Only the nation-state can provide its citizens—and above all its “natives”—with the time-transcending space of the Same, where birth comes into its own by ostensibly being emancipated from death. The Nation is the virtual fulfillment of the Promise of the Nativity and it is this that informs its demographic “biopolitics”.

Birth and contiguous territory, which constitute the temporal and spatial conditions of the providential Nation State, thus acquire a phantasmatic and thinly veiled theological significance when the primary political task is defined as that of protecting the innocent by punishing the guilty. Borders and walls, fences and enclosures are erected to demarcate this binary opposition, beginning with that of separating the inside from the outside, the “native” from the “foreign”. Through its interdictory function, law defines guilt and legitimates punishment. The death penalty is the exemplary legal sanction in a political realm that defines its primary task as that of affirming the sanctity of life—not simply in general but that of its citizens. It confirms its sovereignty by demonstrating its

power to take life in order to protect life.<sup>6</sup> The legal prerogative of taking life provides occasions for the State to demonstrate not just its own power, but through it, the power of Life as such over Death. The “execution” of the death penalty thus comes to exemplify the very notion of “execution” itself. The *legal putting-to-death of the guilty* is presented as the paradigmatic *actus purus*. By this act the living seek to assert their power as the power of Life over Death, which appears as the product of an intentional act seeking to protect the life of the body politic. “For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.” As *Rechtsstaat*, the Nation State seeks to embody this resurrection—not as that of individuals but as that of the collective that survives and even thrives on the death of the individuals that it sacrifices. Execution of the guilty enacts the promise of redemption to come. Without guilt, no redemption. Without law, no safety. Without punishment, no law. Without death, no life.

This interpretation and administration of “guilt,” which is endemic to the political-legal systems that it in turn sustains, derives its staying power ultimately from an onto-mono-theological interpretation of “life” as essentially “birth” and “rebirth,” and thus as a process that transcends death. In this interpretation, which is also at the core of the Christian Gospel, death is defined as that which life must presuppose, but only in order to transcend. In this tradition, Sovereignty always entails the power to give and to take life, long before this ability takes on the specifically “bio-political” forms of population

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<sup>6</sup> In democratic states, it is this demonstration that is decisive, even where the perpetrator(s) were not direct representatives of the state. This is perhaps one of the reasons why most of the major assassinations of the 1960s in the United States were carried out in public or before TV cameras: those of President John F. Kennedy, his brother, Robert, and Malcolm X, but also Lee Harvey Oswald. Martin Luther King, executed on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, is an exception.

control and management analyzed by Foucault. In the Christian tradition, all politics is bio-politics, which also means thanato-politics.

But the rhetorical and political power of this tradition depends essentially on a very distinctive determination of guilt, construing it not simply as indebtedness or dependency on the other but rather as the product of a deliberate, intentional act. Note that in most jurisprudence the principle of *mens rea*—the thing in the mind—remains an essential condition for the determination of guilt: if acts are committed unconsciously or involuntarily, “guilt” and “punishment” are more difficult to assign<sup>7</sup>). It is this act that ultimately defines the subject of history as an individual living being, who qua living individual is mortal, but who at the same time has been created by and in the image of a unique and immortal God. Individualism seems thus essentially linked to the monotheistic tradition, although perhaps not all monotheism must necessarily lead to individualism.

Nor is this link simple or without contradiction. Indeed, the very possibility of law seems to depend upon a maxim that in part appears to contradict *mens rea*: the maxim that

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<sup>7</sup> “According to the traditional principle, *actus non facit reum nisi mens sit rea*, which means that ‘an act does not make a man guilty unless the mind is guilty.’ In other words, without the existence of a guilty intention, a person should not be found guilty of committing some crime - accidental acts are not to be regarded as criminal.” [http://atheism.about.com/library/glossary/political/bldef\\_mensrea.htm?rd=1](http://atheism.about.com/library/glossary/political/bldef_mensrea.htm?rd=1). See also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mens\\_rea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mens_rea). Although the term is Latin, originating in Roman Law, the concept itself was “resurrected” in juridical practice by the Church: “*Mens Rea* began to be used after the 4th Lateran Council in 1215 during the Gregorian Reform. In the 1230’s, Bracton (law clerk for Judge Raleigh) reached back to Augustine and wrote material that was influential for the next 550 years of jurisprudence. Bracton was influenced by the Roman notion of *culpa* (fault) and Catholic Church’s emphasis on moral guilt. These legal principles were not new ideas, but were resurrected as a result of theological reforms within the Catholic church.” <http://www.lawandliberty.org/justice.htm>.

*ignorantia legis neminem excusat*, ignorance of the law excuses no one from being subject to the law. If not a mystery, this installs an enigma at the heart of the individual's relation to the law, and through it, to the state of law, the *Rechtsstaat*. One is expected to be aware of the consequences of one's act in order for law to be "applied" to individual acts, and yet one cannot plead lack of awareness as a reason to be exempted from law, as for example "K" attempts to do at the beginning, and throughout, Kafka's *Trial*. As K. quickly discovers, "guilt" does not depend upon knowledge of the law—although in many cases, it may depend on knowledge or awareness of the consequences of one's acts.

Given the massive *fact* and influence of this tradition, which today is inseparable from what is called Globalization—although it is also not simply identical to it—any alternative to what I will call the dominant monotheistic-individualistic interpretation of guilt and its obverse, the good citizen, will have to build on internal contradictions and tensions rather than appealing to an exteriority that qua exteriority is already included in the internal logic and program of the mono-theological political system and its institutions.

2.

It is with this in mind that I turn to a short text of Walter Benjamin's, which does not directly address political questions at all, but only aesthetic ones. If it can be read as having political implications, this reading will therefore have to proceed by readdressing the much vexed question of the relation of politics to aesthetics, beginning with the question of how those terms are to be understood. In the process, it may turn out to be advisable to revisit the meaning that Kant sought to reserve for the term, "aesthetics," in a famous note at the beginning of his "Transcendental Aesthetics" of Space and Time, in

his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he argued for a return of the meaning to its Greek origins, associated with the study of sensual appearance rather than with the appreciation of beauty or art.<sup>8</sup> As we will see, the implications of Benjamin's text can be understood better as a continuation of this Kantian critique than as the development of an aesthetical conception of politics articulated in the years following Kant's Critiques first by Schiller and then by Hegel and many others.<sup>9</sup>

The text is entitled "Destiny and Character"—*Schicksal und Charakter*. It was written in 1919 but not published until 1921. Although ostensibly not directly concerned with political issues, it was composed at the same time that Benjamin was elaborating what he initially hoped would be a general theory of politics, of which however only one text, his *Critique of Violence—Kritik der Gewalt*—has survived, whereas two other major essays, *The True Politician (Der wahre Politiker)* and *True Politics (Die wahre Politik)*, have been lost. Benjamin's attitude toward "Destiny and Character"<sup>10</sup> as documented in his correspondence was somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, in a letter to Scholem dating from 1919, he counts it among "my best works" and associates it with another lost text: a critique of Ernst Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia*. (II. 3, 941). On the other hand, in a letter written several years later to Hugo von Hofmannsthal he describes the essay as not entirely successful:

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<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B35-36.

<sup>9</sup> See Joseph Chytry, *The Aesthetic State: A Question in Modern German Thought* (NY-LA, Univ. of California Press: 1989)

<sup>10</sup> Usually rendered in English as "Fate and Character," but I prefer "Destiny" to "Fate" in order to retain something of the German verb, *schicken*—to send—out of which *Schicksal* is formed.

A few years ago I tried to liberate the old words, destiny and character, from their terminological servitude [*terminologischen Fron*] and to render their original life accessible in the spirit of the German language. But this attempt reveals to me today just how difficult such a project is. Where insight proves to be insufficient... [a] forcing [takes place] (ibid.)

Benjamin still defends such “forcing” as preferable to the false “sovereignty” that marks much writing of the time, but he nevertheless points to his subsequent discussion of “destiny” in his recently completed essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* as an improvement over the earlier and much shorter text. It should however be noted that this later discussion, like the one that will follow it, in his 1924 study of the *Origin of the German Mourning Play*, both build on the earlier essay, which they quote at length. It can therefore be argued that the earlier text, notwithstanding its imperfections, still provides the best access to Benjamin’s thinking on the question of “destiny,” and above all on its complex but significant relation to what he will analyze as “character.”

It is therefore significant that when Benjamin describes his struggle to “liberate” certain concepts from a terminological tradition that had petrified their internal dynamic, he names only one of the two words that will constitute the title and subject-matter of the essay, namely “destiny” (*Schicksal*). About the other word, “character,” he says nothing. To be sure, the main focus of the 1919 essay—and this will also hold for both of the later texts mentioned: the essay on Goethe’s novel and the study of the German baroque mourning play--remains focused primarily on the first of the two terms: destiny. However as the title suggests and the essay itself makes clear, the two terms, although distinct, are not to be separated. It is in their relationship that they unfold their significance.

In his examination of destiny, Benjamin turns for examples to the aesthetic genre that ever since Aristotle has been placed at the summit of poetry, namely Greek tragedy; character, on the other hand, he associates with a traditionally less valued literary form, namely comedy, but also to a non-aesthetic domain, if under “aesthetics” we understand strictly “fine arts”: with physiognomy. In his 1924 book on *Elective Affinities*, to which Benjamin refers in his letter to Hofmannsthal, he will devote several pages to a discussion of destiny, but very little to the question of character, understandably enough since its comic dimension is allotted very little space in Goethe’s novel.

This comic dimension of “character”, however, will turn out to be of considerable interest in the context of the particular set of questions we are pursuing here, but to get at it, we will first have to examine the way in which Benjamin situates it with respect to “destiny”. He begins his essay by attacking the prevailing manner in which destiny and character are generally related to one another, namely causally, character being understood as the cause of destiny. Causality here he describes as a perspective that implies the ability to prognosticate:

If the character of a human being, i.e. its manner of reacting, were to be known in all of its detail, and if on the other hand the events of the world were known in all of the regions in which they could meet up with that character, it would then be possible to say both what that character would encounter as well as what acts it would perform. In short, its destiny would be known. (GS 2.1, 171/SW 1, XX)

Against this prevailing modern conception, which tends to see in character the “cause” of destiny, thus treating the two as inseparable, Benjamin will go on to distinguish them radically, but also to emphasize certain essential attributes that they share. The most

significant of these is that both are accessible not directly, but only through *signs*: character through (mainly) bodily signs, destiny through both bodily and “signs of external life.” (II. 1, 172) Having thus emphasized the semiotic dimension of both character and destiny, Benjamin emphasizes that this excludes all causality or determinism: “a signifying connection (*Bedeutungszusammenhang*) can never be grounded causally.” (172) Just how this connection should be understood Benjamin is not ready to say: he restricts his discussion to the *semantic* dimension of the signified or designated—*die Bezeichneten*—rather than analyzing its specifically *semiotic* function with respect to character and destiny. The traditional, causal explanation of the relationship of destiny and character presupposes a dichotomy between the external and the internal that for Benjamin is untenable:

For it is impossible to form a concept of the outside of an active (*wirkenden*) human being whose nucleus would consist in character. No concept of an external world can be distinguished from the concept of an active human being. Between both there is rather interaction (*Wechselwirkung*), their spheres of action intermingle [...] The outside, that an active human being encounters can be derived from his interior and vice-versa—indeed each can be considered to be in principle inseparable from the other. From this perspective, character and destiny, far from being theoretically distinct, converge. Thus Nietzsche, when he observes: “When one has character, one also has an experience that returns again and again.” (172-73)

Nietzsche’s observation allows Benjamin to conclude not just that it is theoretically untenable to determine the relationship of character to destiny in terms of the opposition “inside-outside,” since the tendency is then to subordinate the one to the other, the

external to the internal, with the result that where there is character, there precisely can be “no destiny,” but only a certain recurrence—to which he and we will later return.

Having thus challenged the prevailing tendency to associate character with destiny as its internal cause, Benjamin begins to deploy his arguments in favor of their radical separation. Once again, he does so by challenging the prevailing view, which associates destiny with religion and character with ethics. He begins by advancing what will be his major argument with respect to destiny, namely, its constitutive relation to “guilt” (*Schuld*). And it is here that his remarks connect with—and indeed inspired—our introductory reading of the first books of Genesis.

For in attempting to arrive at a genuine understanding of the relation of “guilt” to “destiny,” Benjamin is first of all concerned to challenge the prevailing interpretation of guilt as consisting in a transgressive action, and of destiny as consisting in the “response of God or of the Gods to [such] religious wrongdoing (*Verschuldung*).” ((174/XX).

Destiny, he argues, is indeed linked to guilt, but not to guilt understood in a religious or moral sense. For the latter presupposes—again the Biblical reference is clear—a state of innocence, a non-guilt (in German: *Unschuld*), a paradisiacal situation in which guilt is absent. The model of such innocence and its loss is of course the Garden of Eden, but for Benjamin this is precisely not what marks the notion of guilt with which he is concerned and in which he sees the explanation of destiny. The text that informs his notion of guilt, which is tied not to innocence but to misfortune, is therefore not that of Genesis but that of Greek tragedy, above all the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, to which he will explicitly refer in his subsequent discussion of tragedy in the *Origin of the German Mourning Play*. For it is

in Greek tragedy according to Benjamin, that the essence of destiny and of guilt, is both revealed and transcended:

In tragedy the pagan senses that he is better than his Gods, but this knowledge strikes him dumb, muting language (*verschlägt ihm die Sprache, sie bleibt dumpf*). Without declaring itself (*ohne sich zu bekennen*), it seeks secretly to gather its forces. It does not place guilt and atonement on a scale to measure them, but rather shakes them up together. (175, 203)

Note here how in the process of tragedy, the subject has shifted from the tragic hero as a person, to the language in which he is engaged, above all negatively, by refusing to speak. It is not so much “he” that is struck dumb as language itself, which is “muted”. Or rather, not language *itself*, but the preexisting, predominant language of a certain pagan polytheism. This language is for Benjamin not religious, but rather legal in both origin and structure. Its salient characteristic emerges in an image that Benjamin invokes to describe it: that of the “scale” of legal justice—which in turn is based on equivalence, on the commensurability of guilt and atonement, of *Schuld* and *Sühne*.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the figure of the “scale of Justice,” (174, XXX), which in turn presupposes the separability of what it measures, “guilt” and “atonement” (or punishment):

The laws of destiny, misfortune and guilt, are elevated by the Law (*das Recht*) to measures of the person. [...] The Law condemns not to punishment but to guilt. Destiny is the guilt nexus [*Schuldzusammenhang*] of the living.“ (174-75/203).

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<sup>11</sup> This is also the German title of the novel by Dostoyevsky translated into English as *Crime and Punishment*.

Far from being at home in the realm of religion, then, “destiny” for Benjamin belongs to the juridical realm. But this statement in turn requires further elaboration. For Benjamin’s association of guilt with both “atonement” (*Entsöhnung*) and punishment (*Strafe*) shows that his notion of the Judicial is already informed by certain moral-religious concepts. And as the last (and often cited) sentence of the passage just quoted indicates, this moral-religious dimension is inseparable from a “biological” one, which in turn is not without its *biopolitical* implications. What is decisive is that the “person” subjected to fate through guilt and misfortune is, in the judicial system, measurable. And this in turn subordinated to criteria that render him commensurable. What is the basis of such commensurability, which provides the “scale” on which the legal subject is judged—which is to say, condemned or exonerated? It is precisely his appurtenance to “the living,” which in this case designates a generic category, what Feuerbach and Marx call a *Gattungswesen*, a “species being”—a term that has recently become frequent in biopolitical discourses. Benjamin elaborates this bio-generic dimension of “guilt” as follows:

The Judicial condemns not to punishment but to guilt. Destiny is the guilt-nexus of the Living. This corresponds to the natural constitution of the Living [...]. At bottom it is not man who has a destiny [...] but rather the bare life in him that partakes in natural guilt and in misfortune by virtue of its phenomenality (*kraft des Scheines*). [175/204]

For Benjamin, then, all destiny is manifest destiny—tied to phenomenality, to appearance and to illusion, since all three of these meanings are wrapped up in the untranslatable German word, *Schein* [literally, “shine” or “semblance”]. But the basis of its manifestation is also “natural,” which here suggests that it is linked to an interpretation of

human life that can be described—Benjamin does not—as paradoxical. For it is a life that on the one hand is construed as “natural” in the sense of being intrinsically meaningful, self-contained, but on the other, as guilty and unfortunate, which implies not so much unhappiness as involvement with and dependence on others. But one if not the most significant attribute shared by living beings as individuals is mortality. It is only by participation in something other than themselves, some sort of supra-individual project, community or collective that they can hope to attain a certain measure of “survival”. The question then becomes: survival in what form? In “Destiny and Character” Benjamin’s response is twofold, but also fragmentary. As we have seen, one part of it points to Greek tragedy as the historical moment when “man senses that he is better than his gods,” something he can express only by not expressing it, or rather by refusing to express it in the language available to him. The tragic hero, like Orestes, falls silent, but his fall is fortunate insofar as it disrupts the scale of (existing) law and order as well as that of grammar and meaning, the scale of a certain commensurability. This falling-silent is also tantamount to a “secret collecting of forces”—the forces of another language, or perhaps—and this is not at all the same thing—of a language *as other*. Other than what? On the one hand, other than the present prevailing language informed by pagan polytheism. Man senses that he is better than his *gods*. This “sensing”—in German, *sich besinnen*—implies a reflexive movement in which the individual “hero” returns to him or herself (*sich*), for it is in and as this self that the forces of a future discourse are collected and silently promulgated. But this also introduces a radically temporal dimension into the process, one which defies the “return of the same” that is otherwise associated with destiny, or with immutable guilt.

The paradoxical implications of this tragic-heroic refusal to speak are elaborated by Benjamin in his study of the German Mourning Play, primarily through extended quotation of Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*:

By falling silent (*indem der Held schweigt*), the hero breaks the bridges that bind him to God and the World and lifts himself out of the fields of personality, which demarcates and individualizes itself by speaking, into the icy solitude of the Self. The Self knows of nothing outside of itself, it is solitary without limit. (GS I.1, 287/I, XXX)

And Benjamin also quotes Lukács: “The essence of these great moments of life is the pure lived experience (*Erlebnis*) of selfhood.” (Ibid.) What is paradoxical about this lived experience, however—what makes it not just “lived” by an individual but essentially historical—is that its significance is not limited to itself, to the Self, but rather to a certain abandonment or sacrifice of the Self, which Benjamin describes as follows:

The further the tragic word falls behind the situation –which could no longer be called tragic where the two coincide—the more the hero has escaped from the old institutions, to which, when they finally catch up with him, he abandons only the mute shadow of his being, his Self as sacrifice, while the soul is saved in the words of a distant community. [...] The profoundly Aeschylean drive for justice [*Zug nach Gerechtigkeit*] animates the anti-Olympian prophesy of all tragic poetry. (287-88)

The phrase that Benjamin uses in German to describe the distinctive dynamics of Greek tragedy, which he identifies with Aeschylus, contains a word that is difficult to translate but that will recur in a different context in *Destiny and Character*: the word, *Zug*, which I

translate here as *drive*, is derived from the verb, *ziehen*, to pull. Its dynamic dimension tends to be lost in the usual English translation, *trait*, unless one remembers that every *trait* has to be *traced* and describes therefore not just a static *trajectory* but a movement away from something and toward something else. In the passage quoted, the movement *pulls away* from the judicial-legal—for Benjamin ultimately mythical--order of Law and *toward* the more elusive, more indeterminate area of *Gerechtigkeit*, a Justice that is no longer based on commensurability, on *guilt* as *misfortune*. Above all, what the passages from Rosenzweig suggest is that this pull involves both a return to and ultimate abandon of *selfhood*. What is it that characterizes such Selfhood? As we shall see shortly, it is a certain absence of “character,” at least in the sense that Benjamin will seek to give to the word in the second, shorter part of “Destiny and Character.” But before we come to that discussion, we can already determine what this paradoxical insistence on the Self as that which must be abandoned signifies for Benjamin: nothing more or less than the acknowledgement of a genuine temporality, which is to say, of time as a medium of alterity and of alteration, rather than of one of self-fulfillment as staying the same. The self-isolation and abandonment of the tragic—more precisely Aeschylean—hero reveals the nature of destiny only by breaking with it and by gesturing toward something else: a temporality informed not by the present but by what is to come. And in this gesture—the eloquent refusal to speak—it opens the “guilt-nexus of destiny” to a different future. For, as Benjamin emphasizes,

The guilt-nexus [of destiny] is only inauthentically temporal, in kind and measure entirely distinct from the time of redemption, of music or of truth. On the fixation of the particular kind of time of destiny depends the completed illumination of these things. The card-reader and fortune-teller teach in any

case that this time can at all times be rendered contemporaneous with another [time that is] (not present). (176/XXX)

Benjamin does not so much conclude as break off his discussion here of destiny here, with the admission that the “fixation of the particular kind of time” involved in destiny remains to be “completed.” Its “inauthenticity” appears to be measured by the criterion of a certain linearity: that of a future toward which the tragic hero silently gestures—a future to come. The temporality of destiny, by contrast, seems to be more simultaneous than successive: that of the “card-reader” or “fortune-teller” for whom signs mark a certain “contemporaneity” of the present with the past and the future. Throughout his life Benjamin was fascinated by the interpretive practices of astrologists and physiognomists, graphologists, soothsayers and mediums of all sorts. By associating their practice with the semiotics of “destiny,” Benjamin had reached a point in his essay where any simple oppositions or critiques—for instance of “destiny” as purely “mythical”—seemed to have become highly problematic.

It is therefore precisely at this point that he turns to the second topic of his essay: to the question of “character.” This turn appears within the overall structure of this text highly and significantly ambivalent. On the one hand, it is a turn *away* from the question of “destiny” insofar as Benjamin will insist that *character*, properly understood, has nothing to do with *destiny*. On the other hand it is a continuation of his analysis of *destiny*, insofar as he also emphasizes that both, destiny and character, share the quality of being accessible only through signs, which in turn necessitate “interpretive practices” (*deutenden Praktiken*). How Benjamin deals with this ambiguity is in itself significant: he

distinguishes the two by reasserting that they “belong” or are situated in two very different “spheres”. Destiny, as we have seen, belongs to the “sphere” of myth, which for Benjamin is the origin also of Law (and hence, of a certain politics). It derives from an attitude that construes human being as essentially “natural,” i.e. self-contained, in particular with respect to “life”. The result is guilt, or rather, the mythical-juridical-political—and I would add, although Benjamin does not: *theological*--system that confirms guilt by institutionalizing it.<sup>12</sup>

Comedy, on the other hand, Benjamin assigns to a different “sphere”—which he at first assimilates to the “sphere” of destiny by designating it as a “natural sphere”—*Natursphäre*, a term he had not used previously, despite his emphasis on the “natural” dimension of “destiny”—its connection with “bare”—i.e. “natural”—life. And once again, in order to distinguish character from destiny, Benjamin continues to emphasize the reasons why they have previously been conflated: above all, the belief that their “naturalness” would provide a basis for knowledge of the future, i.e. for a knowledge that would overcome the uncertainty of temporal existence. The most prominent term that Benjamin employs in this connection, and which he will use precisely to distinguish destiny from character, is that of the “net” (*Netz*) or “tissue” (*Gewebe*). But not just any tissue or net: indeed, what makes the tissue, or text, into a net is just its seeming ability to reduce the spaces between its component stitches: the tissue is “firm” (*fest*) insofar as the

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<sup>12</sup> Although Benjamin explicitly asserts that “destiny,” in being mythical, is not “religious,” that does not necessarily contradict or exclude my interpretation that it is nevertheless *theological*, insofar as the world of myth is a world that seeks to provide a logos of the gods—in the plural, to be sure. What is more difficult is the relation of Greek polytheism to Christian “monotheism,” since from this text as from others it is clear that Benjamin construes the latter as a continuation of the former: Greek guilt becomes Christian “original sin.” I will return to this difficult question briefly toward the end of this paper.

net is drawn tightly closed (*verdichtet*), and it is this tautness of the netting that transforms it into a solid “cloth” (*Tuch*). Character is thus understood as the basis and object of what could be called—Benjamin does not—*characterology*, the organized systematic knowledge that determines character in terms of “properties”—in German: *Eigenschaften*. Knowledge of character is possible by virtue of such properties, which once determined resist the contingencies of time and space, remaining constant and always the same. Although Benjamin does not pursue this line, today’s notion of “profiling,” and the use of character analysis in criminology, would be one effect of this attitude. But it is based on a conception of character that Benjamin then goes on to reject, for the simple or not so simple reason that character—and the moral sphere to which it is assigned<sup>13</sup>--can never be determined by “properties but only by actions” (177/XXX).

In this context it should be noted that as soon as Benjamin begins to outline his approach to character, he introduces another word that can be seen as providing an alternative to the notion of *Eigenschaft* (property, feature, characteristic), namely: “trait.”

Characteristic of his use of this term is that the first time he employs it is when he begins to insist on the necessity of demarcating character from destiny in a radical manner, and this despite their both belonging to “natural spheres”:

On the other hand, the concept of character will also have to divest itself of those *traits* [*Züge*] that constitute its erroneous connection to destiny. (176/xxx)

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<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that this conception of “morality” is resolutely pre-Kantian, insofar as it equates morality with nature.

Already this first, negative use of the word *Züge* (traits) displays what will turn out to be one of its essential qualities: that of being removable. They are something that can be shed, removed, replaced by other traits. And indeed, this removability is what distinguishes the “trait” from the “property”—which cannot be removed, legitimately at least, from its “owner” or subject. It should be noted that in German the word has a very different set of connotations than does its English “equivalent”. The word *Zug* is the nominalization of the verb *ziehen*, to pull or to draw. Etymologically it thus suggests not just movement, but often the transition from stasis to movement, a change often brought about by an external force, or at least by a force that is not entirely internal, and hence, not entirely “natural” (in the usual sense of that word). A *Zug* even today names a “train” or a “procession,” but also a “draft”, also a “stroke”. In conjunction with “character” a *Zug* becomes then a “trait”. But the associations just mentioned indicate that this “trait” is inseparable from its movement—both that of which it is the trace, and that which can detach it from its current location.

Such connotations explain the rather surprising way in which Benjamin then goes on to define the “natural sphere” to which character belongs, and which in fact then seems anything but natural: the theatrical stage. If “destiny” is associated with “tragedy,” but in a way that does not emphasize the theatricality but rather its mythical-legal dimension, “character” for Benjamin is at home in comedy, which in turn is inseparable from the stage. At the “center” of comedy is, Benjamin asserts, “character comedy,” just as comedy itself is the milieu in which “character” must be understood—or rather experienced. For unlike destiny, character comedy, such as that of Molière, does not pretend or claim to offer knowledge—neither psychological nor moral:

If the object of psychology is the inner life of man considered as an empirical being, Molière's *dramatis personae* (*Personen*) are not even useful as material for demonstrations. Character unfolds itself in them like a sun in the brilliance (*Glanz*) of its singular trait (*seines einzigen Zuges*), which allows no other to remain visible in the vicinity of its blinding light. (178/xxx)

It is not just the character "trait" that distinguishes it from destiny and thereby defines its essence for Benjamin: it is the fact that in the "sphere" that is the setting of character—namely, the theatrical world of comedy, the "trait" must be understood as being radically *singular*:

The sublimity of character comedy rests on this *anonymity* of human beings and of their morality and of their morality in the midst of the highest unfolding of the individual *in the singularity of its character trait*. (ibid.)

For those who would be tempted to reduce Benjamin's thought to a celebration of naming and of the name, his emphasis here on *anonymity* can serve as a useful corrective. The "highest unfolding of the individual" in this context at least leads not to anything like a proper, or even improper name, but to a certain *anonymity* that marks the radical singularity of character—but also its comic dimension. If one considers the use of names in sole comedies explicitly mentioned here by Benjamin—those of Molière, but without naming any one play in particular—the notion of "anonymity" would have to be understood as having a certain "generic" quality about it: *The Misanthrope*, *the Miser*, *The Imaginary Patient*—all of these would normally be understood as names of general types. At the same time, however, Benjamin insists both on the dimension of "individuality" in character comedy, and in a very distinctive manner. By comparing the

comic character to the “sun”, he places it at the center of a solar system, which however it also seeks to blot out and render invisible through the power of its manifestation.

Benjamin repeats this solar allusion a bit further on, in order to illustrate the distance that separates character from destiny, for which he reinvokes the image of the net:

The character trait is therefore not the knot in the net. It is the sun of the individual on the colorless (anonymous) sky of human being, which casts the shadow of the comic plot. (ibid.)

This is a strange “sun” indeed: instead of creating the conditions of visibility, it blinds—this itself of course is a long-standing topos going back at least to Plato. However, Benjamin adds a new twist to it: the sun blinds not to itself, but to the others in its vicinity. And the “comic plot” emerges not as the light it emits, but as the shadow it casts. But something is missing: for however single and solitary the sun may be, it can never “cast a shadow” all by itself. There must be something else that blocks its rays. The sentence that follows the one just quoted suggests what that other might be. Benjamin places it within parentheses:

(This—[i.e. the shadowy comic plot cast by the singular trait]—provides the context in which [Hermann] Cohen’s profound dictum may be understood, namely, that each tragic plot, however sublimely it strides on its stilts, casts a comic shadow.) (ibid.)

But, if tragedy and comedy are thus portrayed as inseparable, however distinct they may be—a thought hardly originating with Hermann Cohen—then all of Benjamin’s efforts to clearly separate and distinguish destiny from character may turn out to be more complicated than it might seem. If we try to reconstruct what Benjamin calls the

“eigentlichen Zusammenhang”—the “authentic context” for Cohen’s remark, by juxtaposing it with Benjamin’s images, then the “sun” of the comic character appears to be overlaid with the “tragic plot” described by Cohen: both cast the shadow that is the “comic plot.” The “tragic plot” however is what according to Benjamin seeks to break through the net of destiny. That break-through, then, would take the form of the “comic plot,” marked now not by the silence of the hero, as in tragedy, but by the “singular trait.”

How, then, is this strange phrase to be understood. One more passage from Benjamin’s text may put us on the track of a possible response, one which de-naturalizes the light-image of comedy and thereby casts it in a new light—and at the same time, shadow:

While destiny unrolls the enormous complexity of the guilty and indebted (*verschuldeten*) person, the complication and bonds of their guilt, character reacts to the mythical enslavement of the person in the guilt-nexus by giving the response of genius. Complication becomes simplicity, fate freedom. For the character of the comic person is not the scarecrow (Popanz) of the determinist: it is the beacon (Leuchter: chandelier) in whose rays the freedom of his deeds becomes visible.  
(178/205-6)

As so often with Benjamin, images that one otherwise might expect to clarify and render concrete in fact render more obscure and complex—not the least irony in a passage that celebrates the replacement of “complication” by “simplicity”. But this is perhaps also part of its comic character. In any event, the “sun” here reveals itself to be anything but a *lumen naturalis*: it is a chandelier, a candelabra, a *Leuchter* that shows the way, the beacon that beckons. But the way it lights up with its chiaroscuro rays—its light turned to shadow—is that of the stage, on which character is stripped of its moral pretensions by a

theatricality that is characterized here as the “response of genius” to the “guilt-nexus” in which destiny enmeshes and thrives.

The “single trait” that defines comic character—that defines character as comic and as theatrical—is thus described by Benjamin as “the response of genius,” and a few lines later on, as “manifestations of the new global age (*Weltalter*) of genius.” A new conundrum thus emerges in the constantly evolving *Vexierbild*—puzzle-image—that characterizes the writing of Walter Benjamin in general, and “Destiny and Character” in particular. For what, after all, are we to understand by “genius”?

The response to this question passes first of all by a consideration of translation. *Genius* is not simply equivalent to “genius”, and this for reasons that any reader of Saussure—but how many still read his *Course in General Linguistics*?—will well understand. For Saussure insisted that the “value” of a linguistic sign was dependent not on what it appears to refer to—its referent—but on its differential relations to other signs belonging to the same system or group. This is why the German *Genius* can not simply be translated by the English “genius,” any more than German words such as *Repräsentation* or *da* can be adequately translated by “representation” or “there”. For in each case there are other words in German that more closely approximate the apparent English equivalents. In the case of “genius” that German word is “Genie”. The word “Genie” therefore has first of all to be understood as different from “Genie”, a difference that disappears into the English “genius”, which conflates the two.

In a recent essay, Giorgio Agamben begins an essay entitled “Genius” with the following, very helpful reminder:

The Romans named *Genius* the god to which each man was entrusted at the moment of his birth. The etymology is transparent and remains visible in the proximity of *genius* to *engender*. That Genius should have something to do with *engender* appears moreover evident if one recalls that for the Romans the “genial” object par excellence was the bed: *genialis lectus*, because it was there that the act of generation was accomplished.<sup>14</sup>

What is implied in this link between “genius” and “en-gendering” is not simply the continuation of the same in the other, in offspring for instance, but rather a separation of subject from the process of generation:

We must therefore consider the subject as a field of tensions in which the antithetical poles are Genius and Ego. The field is traversed by two forces that are both linked and opposed: the one that goes from the individual toward the impersonal, the other from the impersonal toward the individual. The two forces cohabit, overlap, separate, but they can neither isolate themselves entirely from another nor identify with each other fully.

[...] Genius is our life insofar as it doesn't belong to us. (16)

Although Agamben's only literary reference in this essay is to Ariel and Prospero in Shakespeare's “*Tempest*,” his emphasis on the tension between “the individual and the impersonal” and the mention of “*The Tempest*,” a play if not a “character comedy,” can help put us on the track of Benjamin's cryptic use of the word “genius” in regard to the comic character and its “singular trait.” For Benjamin too no doubt had a literary text in mind when he invoked this word, although it was not Shakespeare, nor probably not even a comedy, but rather the poetry of Hölderlin. Several years earlier, in 1916, Benjamin had

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<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2005), 7.

written an essay on “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” in which the word occupies a small but decisive part. One of those two poems, entitled in German “Blödigkeit,” usually translated as “Timidity,” but, as Peter Fenves, inspired by Avital Ronell, has recently suggested, could also be rendered as “Stupidity”—begins thus:

Are then many of the Living not known to you?  
Does your foot not tread on the true as on carpets?  
Therefore, my *Genius*, step only  
Unprotected into life [*bar ins Leben*], and be not concerned!  
(*Sind denn dir nicht bekannt viele Lebendigen?*  
*Geht auf Wahrem dein Fuß nicht, wie auf Teppichen?*  
*Drum, mein Genius! Tritt nur*  
*Bar ins Leben, und sorge nicht!*)

Hölderlin’s *Genius*, like Agamben’s, is inseparable both from the individual and yet irreducible to it—quite simply because it is defined precisely by its divisibility, its separability, its inability to stay with and be absorbed into an integrated ego. Nor can it even remain—so Benjamin, commenting Hölderlin’s passage in his essay—within the sphere of poetry. It must “step unprotected into life,” as a sphere that is not simply reducible to poetry, although not simply isolatable from it. Ironically, in view of his later essay, in the earlier one Hölderlin’s admonition to his *Genius* is placed by Benjamin under the sign of a profound “destiny linking the Living with the poet” (GS2, 116/SW XXX)—yet another indication that the “response of *Genius* to destiny” does not dissolve the link to it—even in the comic character with its singular trait. Rather, it suggests that the singularity of that trait has to do with the fact that it cuts both ways: toward and away from the guilt-nexus of destiny. What it “shadows” is precisely that guilt nexus. And it does so not by cutting all ties with it, but by reinscribing it in a space that it can no longer

entirely dominate. In Benjamin's commentary to Hölderlin's poems, that space is that of the "*Lage*"—the situation that is always more or less "opportune" (*gelegen*), and thus always more or less temporally *relative* and *relational*. In the case of the comic character, individuality becomes "singular" and a "trait" by being set on stage. The stage, whether tragic or comic, or neither, always involves a relative, relational situational placing in which space and time converge but never close or conclude. The space of the stage is always open to transformation: always open to the invisible others, not just as the audience of a single night, but the audiences to come, as well as the audiences gone by and those that will never actually see or hear the play—but will be affected by it or its after-effects.

The single trait is thus "comic", lends itself to laughter and to amusement, by presenting itself in isolation, and yet never being absolutely cut off from its surroundings, its past and its future. This is why the singular trait is always tendentially on the move, on the run, drawing away from something and towards something else. It always seeks to place itself at the center of its world, whether as the sun in a solar system, or the chandelier in a theater. But it seeks not so much to make visible as to blind to whatever surrounds or approaches it. It seeks to do this...but remains comical in never attaining what it seeks. Its non-attainment is already inscribed as the comic dimension of its singular trait.

Comedy has long been understood to have an eminently social significance. And one can see how this tradition is continued in the ambivalence of Benjamin's singular trait. But what about politics? Can there be a politics of the singular trait? Would it be a comic politics?

Given that this paper is already far too long for the occasion that prompted its writing, I will have to limit myself to two very brief indications in response to this question which, after all, is what interest me the most here, and in the project to which this text belongs: that of exploring how a “politics of singularity” might be thought.

1.

B

enjamin’s essay, “Destiny and Character,” although written in 1919, was only published in 1921. In the same year Sigmund Freud published his essay on “Mass Psychology and Ego Analysis.” A central chapter in that book was devoted to the problem of “identification,” which Freud described as an inevitable process in the formation of the ego but also one that always remained highly ambivalent.

Focusing as almost always on the male child, Freud wrote that identification marks the child’s “earliest emotional tie to another person.” It is an ambivalent tie insofar as it involves the desire to be “like” the other person, which ultimately means replacing the other by occupying its place. For a self-conscious ego, only one body can occupy one place at one time. There is therefore, from the point of view of this ego, place only for one person at one time. To identify with another—with the father or mother—is therefore to replace that person, often by ingesting it. Cannibalism is thereby cited by Freud as an early tendency and instance of such identification. As Freud went on to describe this process, however, it emerges that identification, which plays such a decisive role in the formation of the identity of the subject, is itself anything but all-inclusive. It is, as Freud writes, often “partial” insofar as it identifies not with the other as a whole person, but only with a part of the other—with “a single trait” (*einzigem Zug*) of

the other. This form of identification Freud then interprets as a powerful force in the formation of groups, of “Masses,” and in the organization of such masses through identification of and with a Leader—Freud’s term, in 1921, was *Führer*. Freud’s use of the term, in the same year that Benjamin’s essay appeared, would probably have been forgotten had it not been for Lacan, who in his 1962 lectures on the problem of “Identification” placed Freud’s notion of the “singular trait”—translated as the “trait unaire”—at the heart of his reinterpretation of psychoanalysis in general. Hitherto, Lacan told his listeners, philosophy from Plato to Kant (and presumably beyond) had placed its emphasis on the One as the symbol of Unity. By contrast, the Freudian experience and experiment emphasized not the unity of the subject but rather the “singular trait,” this “unsituatable thing, this aporia for thought that consists in the fact that it is the most purified, simplified, reduced to a whatever (n’importe quoi)...” And he continues:

The paradox of this One is that the more it resembles...the more the diversity of all appearances is erased in it, the more it supports, even incarnates [...] difference as such. The reversal of the position around the One results in the fact that we pass from the Unity (*Einheit*) of Kant to singularity (*Einzigkeit*) (singularity), to uniqueness as such. [...] If the function that we assign to the One is no longer that of Unity but rather of Singularity, we have passed –and this is the novelty of psychoanalysis – from the virtues of the norm to those of the exception.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> J. Lacan, Seminar (unpublished) on “L’identification,” session of 21 February 1962.

The subject of the signifier, represented by a subject to another signifier, thus inscribed the notion of the “trait unaire” in a network of signification that paradoxically defined singularity as a differential but fully relational notion, a trait or trace, as Derrida would later call it, to stress its temporal relation to what had gone before and what would be coming after.

Whether Freudian, Lacanian, or read through the perspectives of both, the “singular trait” defines a process by which the subject—including the political subject—defines its place in a social and political context determined as irreducibly ambivalent. The claim to be self-identical and indeed omniscient, which is a claim that derives not just from individuals but from the legal system that defines in part their functions and obligations as members of a polity—this claim derives from the legal system itself, and not just from a particular set of laws, but from the Law itself. If Josef K. is awakened one morning to find himself accused of a crime of which he knows nothing—not even of what he is accused, this “Kafkaesque” situation reflects nothing specific to Kafka, but the very basis of the legal system itself: the legal “fiction” that everyone is expected to know the Law in all of its dimensions, and negatively, that *Ignorantia legis neminem excusat*: ignorance of the law excuses no one. And yet this same system of law also recognizes that other principle already discussed, which is almost as universal and indispensable as the first, namely the principle of *mens rea*: that intention or awareness of the effects of one’s acts is a constitutive element in determining guilt. Perhaps this is why the “man from the

country” must wait in vain before the Gate of the Law before learning, shortly before his death, that this gate was for him alone: his “*trait unaire*.”<sup>16</sup>

It is this apparently irresolvable aporia at the heart of all law, and hence of all politics—or is there a politics conceivable that would be beyond, before or outside the law?—that leads Benjamin to refer, in his *Critique of Violence*, written shortly after “Destiny and Character,” to the fact that something is “rotten [*Morsches*] in the Law” (GS2, 188, SE XXX) and that the institutional agency charged with administering it therefore deserves particular attention, namely: the Police Force.

2. Which brings me to my second and concluding point—and text. And this time it is in fact a theatrical text, and a comic one to boot. Indeed, it could almost be classified as a modern, contemporary “character comedy,” although significantly it bears the name not of a character type, as with Molière, but of a place: Jean Genet’s “The Balcony”. The Balcony turns out to be both the balcony of a bordello and the balcony of a kind of theater. For in this whorehouse the clients come to play out their fantasies by assuming social roles that are not their own: General, Judge, Priest. On this balcony, but also in their private rooms, these characters exhibit themselves and watch themselves on display. The owner of the bordello is Mme Irma, who is assisted by her friend, the Police Chief. Against a background of political turmoil, that at times threatens to engulf her establishment, the Police Chief takes on an ever more important role, in all senses of that word. But this Police Chief is troubled. He has a problem. Whereas the other bulwarks of the social and political order: judge, general, priest—are all objects of social esteem and recognition: all are included in the “pantheon” of iconic figures, the police chief, like the

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<sup>16</sup> See F. Kafka, “Before the Law,” and J. Derrida’s essay of the same name.

police itself, suffers from a lack of recognition and esteem. To the police fall the dirty work of applying the laws, making them work—what Benjamin in his *Critique of Violence* calls their dual function of preserving laws by making new ones. This is simply due to the fact that the police have to mediate between the structural generality of the law and its indispensable application to singular “cases”—a process that requires both force and intelligence (again in all sense of that word). Benjamin can hardly find words strong enough to describe and disqualify this hybrid function of the police: “anti-natural,” “ghostlike,” “disgraceful” (*Schmachvolle*) (GS II, 189/ XXX), concluding that “its force”—and it should be noted that the title of Benjamin’s essay is Critique of Force (Gewalt) in the sense of Police Force—and not just more abstractly of “violence”—“its force,” he writes “is shapeless (gestaltlos) as its unfathomable, ubiquitous spectral appearance in the life of civilized states.” (Ibid.) More over the police “look everywhere the same,” even though their violence, Benjamin argues, is far worse in democratic states than in dictatorships or monarchies, where their potential violence and role is not augmented by the separation of powers (so Benjamin writing in 1921).

In Benjamin’s essay on the Critique of Force (or Violence), however, there is precious little clue of any element of the comic. But there is a description of the police that allows us to make a link between Genet’s much later play. As already indicated, in “The Balcony,” the Chief of Police, who remains anonymous, like all the other characters (a few do have first names, but non last)—the Police Chief suffers from the lack of what today might still be called “image”. And much of his effort in the play is devoted to trying to find ways of improving his image, so that he too may one day be granted entrance into the Pantheon of political icons. He too hopes one day to be one of the

figures that the clients of Mme Irma “play” out in their fantasies, and in her rooms. And then, suddenly, he stumbles upon a possible strategy to overcome the fear, and disgust, inspired by his office:

I fear that they’re afraid, jealous of a man, but... (he searches) but not of a wrinkle, for example, or a curl of hair...or a cigar...or a riding whip.<sup>17</sup>

The Police Chief has stumbled upon the secret of identification, and perhaps of political identity, at least in our societies: people can be afraid of a “man,” but not of a partial trait: a curl of hair, a cigar, a riding whip. The partiality of identification that Freud observed, Genet in this play interprets as a response, not simply of Genius to Destiny, but of anxiety to what it desires but also most fears: the whole individual, i.e. the primal father. The super-ego that says, “Be like me: be yourself!” To take the place of the other as a whole means doing away with the whole as other—and therefore with the identificatory basis of constructing oneself as a whole. And so a compromise is reached, unconsciously, in an identification that could be called “synecdochal”: pars pro toto.

And so, at about the same time that Lacan had begun elaborating his theory of the imaginary, The Police Chief comes up with the following project:

The Police Chief. The last project of an image that was submitted to me... I hardly dare to speak to you of it.

The Judge. It was ... so bold?

The Police Chief. Very. Too much. I don’t dare tell you. (Suddenly he seems to decide.) Gentlemen, I have confidence in your judgment and

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<sup>17</sup> J. Genet, “*Le Balcon*,” (Paris, 1956), p. 127.

your dedication. [...] Here it is: I have been advised to appear in the form of a giant phallus!

Irma. Georges, you? (127)

The Police Chief is successful; the defeated revolutionary comes to Irma's house to play the role of the Police Chief and castrates himself. And the Police chief celebrates his consecration—political monotheology—by taking his leave with the following words:

Police Chief. Did you see? Did you see me? There, just a short while ago, bigger than big, stronger than strong, deader than dead. Well, I have no need to stay with you any longer. [...] I have won the right to take my seat and to wait two thousand years. (To the assembled photographers) You, watch me live and die. For posterity: shoot! (Three magnesium flashes, almost simultaneously). Won! (He enters the tomb backwards...)

And his final words echo the cry of Oedipus at Colonos, and the ghost of the King Hamlet: "Think of me!"

In this character comedy, the "single trait" that alone is allowed admission to the political-theological Pantheon is that of the Giant Phallus, symbol of the whole Man, whole before gendered sexuality, whole as representative of the Human Genre: of the Human as single genre.

In Lacanian terms, this is identification based on the single trait as imaginary, synecdochal representation of an object. It is, as Benjamin acknowledged at the outset of his essay on "Destiny and Character," a logic of the signified, not of the signifier. But the

notion of the singular trait, in its singularity, is also and perhaps above all a partiality that cannot be absorbed into such a totality. Just as the I, whether as Freudian ego, Jakobsonian shifter, or Hölderlinian poetic I--is itself never simply alone. And in this fact there persists perhaps the possibility of another kind of politics, for which the singular trait would not simply be a moment in the consecration of the Indivisible Individual.

Samuel Weber, Chicago, March 3, 2008