

Article

On the Brinks of Language: Benjamin's Approach to a Tragic Dialogue

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore the potential tension that according to Walter Benjamin is at stake in the opposition between the bourgeois conception of language and an inquiry into the essence of language, taking into account important texts written in 1916, in order to shed light on language that moves in the direction of a dialogical situation premised on a tragic approach. More specifically, beginning with an outline of Benjamin's notion of the relationship between language and action, with particular attention to his 1916 letter to Martin Buber and the role of language, it then goes on to discuss the structure of language in the 1916 essay on language, at the end of which Benjamin asserts that there is a "tragic relationship between the languages of human speakers". Drawing on a posthumously published essay from 1916, entitled *The Role of Language in Tragedy and Trauerspiel*, it finally seeks to show how this tragic relationship is essential to a dialogical situation.

Keywords: Benjamin; language; silence; communication; tragic

1. Introductory Remarks

In July 1916, a then 24-year-old Walter Benjamin wrote a letter to Martin Buber on the occasion of an editorial Buber had published earlier that year in the journal *Der Jude*—a journal that Buber had launched with the aim of expounding intellectual Jewish affairs (cf. Friedman 1988, pp. 203–30; Mendes-Flohr 1991, pp. 209–19). In his editorial, entitled "The Watchword [*die Losung*]", Buber had invited various intellectuals to reflect on the question of politics, and more precisely on the relationship between politics and thought, in the light of the ongoing World War. A few months before, in May 1916, Benjamin had responded to Buber's invitation to contribute to this journal's special issue.¹ While Benjamin had pondered Buber's invitation in May, stressing that the "problem of the Jewish spirit is one of the most important and persistent objects of [his] thinking" (Benjamin 1994, p. 79; 1966, p. 125),² his letter from July shows a highly critical attitude towards and fundamental rejection of Buber's ambition for this journal, whose first volume included numerous examples of nationalist attitudes, revealed most explicitly in the enthusiasm for the "European war".³

Despite his outright rejection of Buber's account of the war, and thus of his intellectual development, Benjamin, while reading the journal's contributions, underscores the importance of the political enterprise of thought. Without embarking on an actual analysis of the war's *Realpolitik*, Buber's invitation had inspired Benjamin to reflect on the relationship between politics and thought by inquiring into the relationship between language (*Sprache*) and acting (*Handeln*). Such inquiry goes, as we shall see, into the essence of language, precisely because the reduction of the political to an enterprise positively given claims to be independent of the linguistic framework within which such inquiry will be conducted.

The coordinates in Benjamin's inquiry into the relationship between politics and thought shift from an analysis of *Realpolitik*—where language is relegated to an instrumental function comprised in a principle of action, and thus is reduced to the "transmission [*Vermittlung*] of content" that "completely fails to consider a relationship [*Beziehung*] between language and action in which the former would not be the instrument [*Mittel*] of the latter" (Benjamin 1994, p. 80; 1995, p. 326)—to an inquiry into the essence of language. Benjamin's turn to the



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essence of language implies the distinction between what he calls the bourgeois conception of language and language as such—a distinction that can be mapped onto that between an instrumental and constitutive conception of language inasmuch as its “origin does not reside within itself”, but in an epistemic setting that enables the relationship of “words and actions [*Verhältnis von Wort und Tat*]” to be studied by its “sayable and expressible motives [*sagbaren und aussprechbaren Motiven*]” (Benjamin 1994, p. 80; 1995, p. 326).

The political enterprise of thought is, in other words, determined by epistemic motives that propel politics into certain actions. As Benjamin argues, language is reduced to “the motives that determine the person’s actions in the soul’s inner [*im Innern der Seele*]” (Benjamin 1994, p. 80; 1995, p. 325). What is characteristic about this conception of language is, Benjamin continues, that “these motives can be discussed; others can be juxtaposed to them” in that they are sayable and can be subsumed under the constation of propositional discourses.

Benjamin goes on to say that every action of politics, which seeks to account for the interior motives that determine the person’s action, is “(in principle) placed at the end as the result of an arithmetic process [*Rechenprozesses*], tested from all sides” (Benjamin 1994, p. 80; 1995, p. 326). The reason is that the prevailing bourgeois conception of language impedes the thought of what Benjamin in this context refers to as *politics* “in its broadest sense [*in jenem weitesten Sinne*]” (Benjamin 1994, p. 79; 1995, p. 325). This sense of politics undergoes, on the one hand, a radical linguistification, and on the other hand, it must prepare itself for a radical redeployment of the very relationship between language and action. The bourgeois conception of language, according to which the “means of communication is the word, its object factual [*Sache*], and its addressee a human being” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 65; 1991c, p. 144), leads language into the confrontation with an ascertained reality whereby language itself is “explained away as an empty gesture”. As Werner Hamacher puts it, as soon as the world of things becomes present, language seems “destined to disappear” (Hamacher 1996, p. 337).

Accordingly, language not only produces statements about something which is not itself determined as language’s own signified. This relationship of language is not, as indicated, based on a propositional structure according to which the relationship between language and action is determined as something definite. On the contrary, Benjamin directs us to a domain that calls for another language, as it were, which is not made into something predicative but rather serves to indicate how the not-yet-being-given of the relationship itself is given in a language other than the bourgeois conception, whose origin does not reside within itself, but rather is bound to the “sayable and expressible motives”. As I shall try to make clear in the next section, the thought which is spinning out in Benjamin’s letter to Buber is that of an other language that has its origin within itself, namely the divine word that must be understood “through itself and its own purity [*eigene Reinheit*]” (Benjamin 1994, p. 80; 1995, p. 327).

To acknowledge the presence of this other constitutive language and to explore the potential tension between the bourgeois-instrumental and constitutive conception of language, I aim to show that, for Benjamin, the two conceptions are interrelated, and that language moves in the direction of a dialogical situation that is premised on a tragic approach. I first outline Benjamin’s notion of the relationship between language and action, with particular attention to his 1916 letter to Buber and the role of language. I then discuss the structure of language in Benjamin’s 1916 essay *On Language as Such and on Human Language*. Towards the end of this unpublished thesis, Benjamin introduces language against the background of a “tragic relationship between the languages of human speakers”. Finally, I show that whilst the word “tragic” constitutes a sort of *hapax legomenon*, as it is mentioned only once in the 1916 language essay, Benjamin explores in another posthumously published essay from that same year, entitled *The Role of Language in Tragedy and Trauerspiel*, how the “tragic is situated in the laws governing the spoken word between human beings”. Although Benjamin, as far as I can see, does not delve further into this debate, though he develops his own approach, I want to explore the thesis that this tragic relationship between human speakers is in the essence of language and therefore is essential to the dialogical situation.

2. On the Relationship between Language and Action

It is a widespread view, Benjamin claims in his 1916 letter to Buber, that language exerts an influence on the “moral world” and “human behavior”, in that language places the motives behind actions at our disposal and to that extent precedes them. In this view, language is “only one means” of spreading (*Verbreitung*) the motives that determine the person’s actions. What is characteristic about this conception of language is, Benjamin argues, its inability to envisage the relationship (*Beziehung*) between language and action without thereby turning language and the concomitant degradation of action into a mere means for attaining an end. This relationship (*Verhältnis*), Benjamin says, concerns both an “impotent language, degraded to pure instrument [*Mittel*]”, and a “writing that is pitiful, weak action and whose origin [*Quelle*] does not reside within itself” (Benjamin 1994, p. 80; 1995, p. 326), which, as already indicated, emerge from an epistemic setting of propositional motives.

2.1. “In the Middle of All Relations”

As far as the relationship between language and action is premised on an end goal of human action, Benjamin argues that every action is derived from “the expansive tendency to string words together [*Wort-an-Wort-Reihens*] [...] where the entire relationship between word and action [*Wort und Tat*] is, to an ever-increasing scale, gaining ground as a mechanism for the realization of the right [*richtigen*] absolute” (Benjamin 1994, p. 80; 1995, p. 326; cf. Weber 2011, p. 604). The fact that Benjamin’s reservation toward the bourgeois conception of language is indebted to his own critique of the Romantic absolute, that is, how his critique aims at the absolute which it, as Rodolphe Gasché (2002, p. 67) argues, “severs from itself in absolute purity”, must be left open to further discussion, as it goes beyond the scope of this article.⁴ Suffice it here to say that Benjamin’s critique of the absolute entails a remarkably stark criticism of the meaning-bearing feature of language, that is, the syntactic structuring of separate words unified in a sequence that expansively develops through an accumulation of the semantic structuring of such words.

Indeed, without delving into the details of Benjamin’s reworking of the relationship between politics and action, there seems to be an opening here for thinking of Benjamin’s account of language in an alteration of the sense of politics, an alteration that requires us to confront, as Hamacher has argued, an “immanent politics of language” (Hamacher 2011, p. 182) that, rather than serving as a means for a higher purpose, calls (*Anruf*) “to release in [the translator’s] own language that pure language which is exiled [*gebannt*] among alien tongues [*in fremde*], to liberate the language imprisoned in a work” (Benjamin 1996e, p. 261; 1991e, p. 19).⁵

If we return to the instrumental conception of language, we find a clear tendency towards that which has aroused Benjamin’s interest in inquiring into the essence of language. Within the narrow relationship between language and action, Benjamin already also sees a modulation of the relationship itself. One way to approach this modulation is differentiating between two modes of relationship: on the one hand, the relationship (*Verhältnis*) in which language and action are reduced to mediacy of a subject’s attitude, and on the other hand, the relationship (*Beziehung*) in which everything is not already dealt with in advance, that is, subject to an action which—transitively—is determined by an activity aimed at a certain, pre-determined end.⁶

One way of understanding the relationship between politics and thought is for Benjamin to reconsider the relationship between language and action. Yet, whilst Benjamin says that the instrumental conception of language realizes the “right absolute” by stringing words together in sequences, he also says that there is a breach of the objectifying linguistic reality that is pre-programmed to calculate the relationship between language and action. In other words, when Benjamin is immersed in reflecting on the relationship between language and action, there is an already articulated relation to “the groundwork for the motives” upon which the very relationship is construed.

It is to a more specific focus on the implications of the two components—language *and* action—of the relationship that we now turn. If neither the components of the relationship nor the relationship itself receives particular emphasis, it is because it always moves within language to which the very relationship between language and action belongs. Language as an inquiry into the essence of language brings the inaugural moment for the relationship between language and action into language, whose incommensurability is itself determined in “the middle of all relations [*die Mitte aller Beziehungen*]” (Benjamin 1996f, p. 34; 1991f, p. 124; cf. Caygill 1998, pp. 13–14, 39). By opening itself to the event of the middle, as it were, nothing else becomes part of it but the passivity which, in contrast to the linguistic model of the absolute that is realized by the mechanism constituting the right sequence of words, opens unconditionally towards the world and the absolute.

2.2. Language Turns toward Language

In this reading, Benjamin’s own thought through the letter to Buber raises the question of how, with the turn to another conception, language is turned into an opening towards the unconditional. For even if the bourgeois conception of language is said to derive from an expansive linguistic process and, by extension, construing words within a homogeneous medium of language that proves to be an ever-so-effective space of action, it is at the same time “not through the transmission of content, but rather through the purest disclosure” of the unconditional that language reveals its “dignity [*Würde*] and its essence” (Benjamin 1994, p. 80; 1995, p. 326). In his attempt to grasp the role of the “politically engaged writing”, that is, a writing style taking into account its futural possibilities, Benjamin appeals to the dignity and essence of language. By referring to language as *un-mediated*, Benjamin writes—and I cite at length:

I can understand writing as such as poetic, prophetic, objective [*sachlich*] in terms of its effect, but in any case only as *magical*, that is as *un-mediated* [*un-mittel-bar*]. Every salutary effect, indeed every effect not inherently devastating, that any writing may have resides in its (the word’s, language’s) secret [*Geheimnis*]. In however many forms language may prove to be effective, it will not be so through the transmission of content, but rather through the purest disclosure [*das reinste Erschließen*] of its dignity and its essence. And if I disregard other effective forms—aside from poetry and prophecy—it repeatedly seems to me that the crystal-pure elimination of the ineffable [*Unsagbaren*] in language is the most obvious form given to us to be effective within language and, to that extent, through it. This elimination of the ineffable seems to me to coincide precisely with what is actually the objective and dispassionate manner of writing [*nüchternen Schreibart*], and to intimate the relationship between knowledge and action precisely within linguistic magic. My concept of objective and, at the same time, highly political style and writing is this: to awaken interest in what was denied to the word [*dem Wort versagte*]; only where this sphere of speechlessness [*Wortlosen*] reveals itself in unutterably pure night [*unsagbar reiner Nacht*] can the magic spark leap between the word and the motivating action, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides. Only the intensive aiming [*Richtung*] of words into the core of intrinsic silence [*den Kern des innersten Verstummens*] is truly effective. I do not believe that there is any place where the word would be more distant from the divine than in “real” action [*Handeln*]. Thus, too, it is incapable of leading into the divine in any other way than through itself and its own purity. Understood as an instrument [*Mittel*], it proliferates. (Benjamin 1994, p. 80; 1995, pp. 326–27)⁷

In this extremely dense passage from the letter to Buber, in which almost every word would call for commentary, Benjamin thematizes his philosophical inquiry into the essence of language, which becomes particularly evident, as we shall see in the next section, in his 1916 language essay. But to begin with, it should be noted that the instrumental conception reduces language to conveying a semantic content in which words denote things to which they refer. In contrast to this, Benjamin argues that his approach to language is to articulate

an objective writing, the character of which is to show its own philosophical form of representation, that is, a “highly political style and writing”. Though Benjamin does not explicitly spell out what this objective, political style of writing necessarily entails, he highlights an experience of language where its intransitive, un-mediated quality is sought to be explained in terms of language’s propensity to write out its own purity, that is, a movement in which the un-mediated medium of the absolute quality of pure language is thought in close proximity to that which does not allow itself to be said in what is said (cf. [Lacoue-Labarthe 2002](#), p. 11).

When Benjamin claims that the instrumentalized language not only consists in transmitting linguistic content, but also allows the dignity and nature of language to display itself in a secret relation to its purest disclosure, it is because language reveals itself at its limits, so to speak, where speechlessness is constituted by that in the word which is denied to the word. Importantly for Benjamin, as the German word for “denied”, *versagen*, suggests, it is not so much that something is denied to the word but rather that what can be said is enabled by the fact that the boundaries of what is said are both restricted and extended in terms of the limitation, pertaining not only to what is *not* said but also to what is renounced. As the root meaning of the German word *Versagen* suggests, to awaken an interest in what is *renounced* in the word, as Benjamin does, indicates a *saying* (*Sagen*) of the word that arises out of the word’s own occurrence as withdrawal ([Weber 2011](#), p. 606). Put differently, what is renounced in and by the word, the speechlessness of language, is not to be understood as something given outside of language ([Caygill 1998](#), p. 13). Rather, the renunciation introduces a subtle understanding of the essence of language: What is renounced in the word does not renounce the saying of the word insofar as it reveals itself in what Benjamin rather enigmatically calls the “unutterably pure night”, whose magic spark leaps between the word and its deed. In other words, by renouncing the word, Benjamin is brought into the proximity of language’s secret.⁸

Let me attempt to unpack this strange circuit of reflection. As we have just seen, speechlessness discloses itself in the pure night in such a way that it gives space to a magical spark leaping between word and action. Moreover, in opening towards the absolute that for Benjamin is experienced in the unity (*Einheit*) of language and action, the very disclosure of language does not relegate the absolute to an indissoluble indiscernibility. In the unutterably pure night, in which the instrumental conception of language is represented to itself as a means for its self-determination, language disappears into the night. However, because language disappears into an unutterably pure night, language can no longer simply derive its meaning from a notion of speechlessness. For at the moment when the *ineffability* in and of language comes into presence, it can be said only *as* a gesture of the ineffable. To put it crudely, insofar as language disappears unutterably in the pure night, the ineffability of the disappearance of language emerges in a never-quite-pure night ([Blanchot 1962](#), p. 214).

In contrast, as we have seen, to the expansive disposition of word-by-word sequences, Benjamin explores how the political enterprise of language “is truly effective”. Here we can see how Benjamin reverses the movement of the “intensive aiming of words” in order to make its way “into the core of intrinsic silence”. At this point, one may ask: What does core (*Kern*) mean here? Although Benjamin does not elaborate further on the relationship between words and the core of intrinsic silence, Samuel [Weber](#) (2011, p. 607) shows that the core, designating the transition from speech to silence, marks the crossing of a threshold which belongs properly neither to the inside nor to the outside of the core as such. Thus, even if the core concerns that which is intrinsic, it unfolds itself outward in terms of silence.

This double movement of language, in which the “elimination of the ineffable in language” is “given to us to be effective within language and, to that extent, works through it”, discloses, Benjamin says, its “secret” to language. Or, to put this double movement differently, language, on the one hand, limits itself to what can be uttered and consequently extricates itself from what is ineffable. On the other hand, however, language encounters itself as its own impassable limit on which language attempts to speak of itself *as* the

ineffable. On this understanding, language seems to conceive itself in renouncing itself in the speechlessness of language.

The discussion of Benjamin's inquiry into the essence of language has already indicated that the question of how language might be appropriate to speak of the essence of language is not to extricate the ineffable from the word, but rather to leap over the bourgeois-instrumental conception and to inquire ineptually into language.

3. Benjamin's Inquiry into the Essence of Language

The bourgeois conception of language and its fetishization of the "'real' action", as we have already seen, is furthest from divine language. With a rigorous hesitation to the instrumentalization of language in mind, Benjamin sets out to inquire into the essence of language. A few months after his letter to Buber, namely on 11 November 1916, Benjamin mentions in a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem a "small thesis [*kleinen Abhandlung*]" (Benjamin 1994, p. 81; 1995, p. 343) he had worked on in the summer of 1916. Benjamin's thesis that remained unpublished during his lifetime is known under the heading *On Language as Such and on Human Language*. The importance of the title of this essay draws a distinction with far-reaching implications, namely between language in general and human language in particular.

3.1. *Hovering over the Abyss of Language*

As a first step toward an appreciation of human language, Benjamin sets out to list several languages, including the language of music, sculpture, art, justice, technology, or religion, in that these share the aim of communicating contents of the spirit (*geistiger Inhalt*) through language (Benjamin 1996c, p. 62; 1991c, p. 140). But what is common to human languages, Benjamin argues, is that their founding moment is articulated through "the pure language [*die reine Sprache*]" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 65; 1991c, p. 152), which these languages seek to translate in various ways, and in this way come to stand out in their separate individuality. As an act of language, language communicates its essence in such a way that by being the medium of communication, language shows itself as a space in which it can take place. To understand Benjamin's inquiry into the essence of language, it is therefore crucial to understand the distinction between the human word and the origin of language itself by which the potentiality of language is transferred to an act of language in terms of language's mediation (Weber 2008, p. 117).

What we are encouraged to focus on in the study of language is, first, that language itself is the capacity for communication and, second, that "*all language communicates itself in itself [Jede Sprache teilt sich in sich selbst mit]*" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 64; 1991c, p. 142). Language is in the "purest sense the 'medium' of the communication". And as Benjamin immediately goes on to add, insisting on the irreducible immediacy of mediation, "the medial, which is the immed-iacy [*Unmittelbarkeit*] of all spiritual communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 64; 1991c, p. 142; Weber 2008, p. 118). According to Benjamin, the advance of linguistic theory, which he identifies in the aforementioned letter to Scholem as an "infinitely difficult theme" (Benjamin 1994, p. 81; 1995, p. 343), prompts him to penetrate to the "deepest layers" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 69; 1991c, p. 151) of language.

If we follow the advance of linguistic theory which attempts to capture the fundamental problem of language, which is deeper than its propositional content, in that language cannot be isolated from its medium, we see that Benjamin seeks to avoid two basic tendencies held in the conception of language: On the one hand, Benjamin refers to the bourgeois instrumentalization of language as a means to an end and not as an end in itself; on the other hand, he refers to a theological-metaphysical hypothesis that "it is in the nature of each [thing] to communicate its spiritual content" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 63; 1991c, p. 141). In order to avoid these two basic tendencies, Benjamin introduces in his theoretical approach a fundamental distinction, which he refers to as the "most original" distinction pertaining to such an inquiry into the essence of language, namely between the "spiritual being and the linguistic being in which it communicates" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 63; 1991c, p. 141). This

category distinction is necessary for his critique of the confusion of the “asserted identity between spiritual and linguistic being”, that is, the identification of language and things, whereby the “great abyss into which all linguistic theory threatens to fall” opens.

One way to express this “incomprehensible paradox” is, Benjamin argues, to articulate the double sense (*Doppelsinn*) of the word “logos”. While the word sets the spiritual and linguistic beings apart from one another, it also indicates their coming into contact. The central distinction between the spiritual and linguistic being that constitutes the first stage of linguistic theory, aims to show how the “spiritual being communicates itself in, not through, a language, which means that it is not outwardly identical with linguistic being” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 63; 1991c, p. 142). In other words, the equation of spiritual and linguistic being implies a “great metaphysical scope” to linguistic theory inasmuch as it elevates itself to “the center of linguistic philosophy” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 66; 1991c, p. 146).

Since the central distinction to linguistic theory is particularly difficult to employ, it is worth circling back for a moment to the double sense of the word “logos”. Inspired by the Revelation of John (1: 8), Benjamin cites Hamann’s attempt to capture the spirit of language in things: “*Language, the mother of reason and revelation, its alpha and omega*” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 67; 1991c, p. 147).⁹ For Benjamin, I argue, the essence of language is the ground in which the spiritual being communicates itself in such a way that the ground itself recedes into an abyss, that is to say, language does not lead to anything other than that in which language is grounded, namely language itself. And as long as we endure what the “logos” says, Benjamin suggests a hovering (*schwebend*) over the abyss.

How do we endure what the “logos” says? In the 1916 language essay, a certain orientation to the bourgeois-instrumental conception of language is quite evident from the outset. Benjamin identifies one fundamental problem constitutive of the linguistic theory, and his discussion of this problem serves to introduce his attempt to move to a more originary notion of language that points to the “infiniteness” of language. Benjamin writes, precisely because “nothing is communicated *through* language, what is communicated *in* language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constitutive infinity. Its linguistic being, not its verbal contents, defines its frontier” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 64; 1991c, p. 143). Beneath the verbal contents of language, nearer to the origin, his analysis would bring to light the unique infinity of language that the bourgeois conception of language would prove hitherto to have concealed. Let us follow his inquiry further into the essence of language in order to shed light on this constitutive infinity of language.

3.2. *The Gift of Language*

The indication on which I want to focus is given in an exegesis of the biblical story of creation, where Benjamin broaches a genesis of language that extends itself into everything insofar as it is in the nature of each one to communicate its spiritual contents (Mosès 2009, p. 70). The biblical story of the Genesis in which God creates the world and nature with words serves as the background for his inquiry into the essence of language: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth [. . .]. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (Gen 1:1–3, King James version). Here Benjamin gives us a first hint of how God entrusts human beings with language to name the created things. The indication on which I want to focus draws what appears to be an implication of this strangeness of the essence of language, namely that the language transmitted to the human being proceeds from an address by the silent communication of nature to the human being who would have to listen to it, and to respond to it (more on this later).

As it is famously declared in the prologue to the Gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word”, and further, “All things were made by it” (John 1:1–3); but for Benjamin, there is no reason why the world is given in and by the word. Rather, the point of departure of Benjamin’s inquiry is that the human being has received the “*gift of language*” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 68; 1991c, p. 148). His inquiry into its essence highlights the secret of language where language is seen to have its roots in an inexplicable and mysterious reality. The fact

that language, at its core, is a secret conveys a kind of divine speech act according to which the “act of creation” is accomplished as an original speech. Benjamin writes:

Let there be—He made (created)—He named. [. . .] 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 finished creation” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 68; 1991c, p. 148).

From the outset Benjamin distinguishes between creation and knowledge, word and thing, name and named, that is to say, explicit moments which are indistinguishable in God’s creative word: “In God, name is creative because it is word, and God’s word is cognizant because it is name”. To this extent there is an absolute simultaneity between the name and knowledge because God has made things of nature knowable in their names—names which are “identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 68; 1991c, p. 148).

Before the Fall, when the named things of nature reflect the concrete form of the divine word, the human being is endowed with the task of naming the objectless and intentionless things of nature in and with their names: “Man is the namer”. Because the human being has received the gift of language, it has been given the task of naming the things of nature with the so-called *language of names*. By virtue of the gift of language, it becomes possible for the human being to concretely and sensuously understand the things of nature which are encountered in and with the name. And by virtue of the language of names by which the human being translates the silent signs of nature, as it were, language attains its highest dignity. As the “true call [*eigentliche Anruf*]” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 65; 1991c, p. 145) of language, Benjamin finds in the name the “essential law of language”. He writes: “Name as the heritage [*Erbteil*] of human language therefore vouches for the fact *that language as such* is the spiritual being of man” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 65; 1991c, p. 144). As that through which, and in which, language communicates itself, the name is given by the human being to the things of nature whereby God’s creation is completed. In terming the human being as “the speaker of language”, in that the human being “speaks in names”, Benjamin argues that the name represents a “reflection” of God’s word that vouches for a “linguistic community [*Sprachgemeinschaft*] of [nature’s] mute creation with God” (Benjamin 1996c, pp. 68, 70; 1991c, p. 144).

3.3. “In Order to See”

With this overview in mind, both of Benjamin’s preliminary encounter with the biblical story of creation and of the gift of language, let us now take a closer look at how some of these principal issues contribute to Benjamin’s further linguistic theoretical reflections. It is central to Benjamin’s reading of the Genesis, a text that is only initially indispensable to his inquiry into the essence of language, that God created nature and its things in such a manner by which things are subject to language, whereas the human being is not “created from the word” (Benjamin 1996c, pp. 68–69; 1991c, p. 148). Because God did not create the human being from the word, Benjamin argues, and because God did not name the human being as such, language is, as a medium of creation, set free in the human being.

Let me review once more the remarkable analysis of the Genesis with which Benjamin begins his inquiry into the essence of language. Before the gift of language, whereby the human being comes into what is proper to it, that is, to become the speaker of language that “participates most intimately in the divine infinity of the pure word” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 69; 1991c, p. 149), the difference between human and animal has not yet been established. The human being is, as the Genesis (2: 7) puts it, merely a living being (*nephesh hajah*).

By virtue of the gift of language, God gives the word to the human being *to see* it carry out the task that God assigns to the human being: “that of naming things” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 70; 1991c, p. 151). Although the human being receives the “unspoken nameless language of things” in order to convert the mute name into the sonic, the solution of the

task is not merely to give sound to or to determine the silent signs of nature. Rather, in order to perform the task, the human being must translate the nameless language of things into the name. In that sense, God's demand to the human being is twofold. On the one hand, language is set free in the human being so as to name the animals of the earth and the birds of the sky, while on the other hand, God leads the animals to man—Adam—"to see" (Gen 2: 19) what he would call them. And what man calls the living beings, becomes their name (Derrida 2008, pp. 16–18). According to Benjamin, man is the only one of all beings who names his own kind, but who is himself not named by God, and for this reason Benjamin argues that the "theory of proper names", that is, the theory of man's own name, is "the theory of the frontier between finite and infinite language" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 69; 1991c, p. 149).

As we have already noted, the infiniteness of language implies that there is nothing outside of language that conditions it; in other words, language is "conditional on its immediacy". Therefore, Benjamin can say, on the one hand, that nothing is communicated *through* language, and on the other hand, what is communicated *in* language cannot be externally limited by its propositional content. As this distinction suggests, Benjamin is preoccupied with the threshold that separates the infinite from the finite language, which precedes, as it were, the collapse of the infinite language of names in the Fall.¹⁰ Let us further articulate how this becomes crucial for Benjamin's inquiry into the essence of language.

It is worth pointing to Benjamin's habilitation thesis on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925/1928) where the perspective shifts the focus from Plato to an address of Adam as "the father of philosophy" (Benjamin 1998, p. 37; 1991g, p. 217). The first man, "the father of humans", who goes under the Hebrew *isj*, names himself Adam—a collective term for man, or human, in relation to the animals, that is, the animals which were created before him only to be named after him. Before the Fall, the name "Adam" stands for the medium, Benjamin says, who on the seventh day of creation completed the translation of God's creation—that is to say, when the mute things of nature "receive their names from man, from whom in name language alone speaks" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 65; 1991c, p. 144). However, such names have not been handed down from the beginning. According to Benjamin, Adam must attend to how nature communicates itself in language and thus how he receives it: "[T]he name that man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him". This notion of receptivity "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" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 69; 1991c, p. 150).

Recall that in addition to Adam having received the gift of language, Benjamin states that Adam translates the nameless into the name in terms of a free act of naming, whereby a seemingly paradisiacal kinship arises between the name and the named. Benjamin suggests, to be sure, that the "Adamitic naming is so far removed from play or arbitrariness [*Willkür*] that it actually confirms the state of paradise as a state in which there is as yet no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words" (Benjamin 1998, p. 37; 1991g, p. 217). The struggle of the significance of words begins at the moment when Adam—the speaker of language—steps out of language. More precisely, in "stepping outside the purer language of name", a purity which had created a linguistic communion (*Gemeinschaft*) of man with God's creative word, Adam's linguistic situation undergoes a turn of time. From having been the one who names the mute things of nature, a name, as we shall come to see, which for Benjamin is permeated with an intimation of the "'deep sadness [*Traurigkeit*] of nature'" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 72; 1991c, p. 155), Adam's linguistic situation turns into mediation. Language is for Benjamin transformed into a medium for the mediate word, a mediation which is not appropriate for God's immediately creative word. In contrast to the linguistic situation, in which man's community with the creative word of God is instituted with the proper name, and which hitherto had only existed like a residue of the verticality of the word, the pure word is transformed into a means for describing a horizontal communication. This is what Benjamin calls the bourgeois

conception of language according to which “man is communicating factual subject matter to other men [...] through the word by which he denotes a thing. [...] It holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 65; 1991c, p. 144).

3.4. An Infralapsarian Turning of Time

As Adam steps outside the name-language, language loses its first speaker. To gain insight into how the change in Adam’s linguistic situation is paradoxically appropriated in the form of an experience of interruption, it is worth reflecting on Benjamin’s account of the Fall. Crucial to this account is the role of Adam who, having received the gift of language, assumes the position of the speaker of language. This means for Benjamin that Adam becomes the first translator of language, whose task is to transfer the imperfect language of nature into a more perfect one. However, Benjamin goes on to add a twist to this account, namely that when Adam takes possession of language with self-empowered dominion, he calls himself into a subject position only to experience his fall (Menke 1991, pp. 47–48). Benjamin thus argues that it is language that is thereby transformed in bringing language forth as an object whose objectivity pertaining to Adam’s translation is no longer “guaranteed by God” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 70; 1991c, p. 151). Rather, what the change in Adam’s linguistic situation shows is that man only arbitrarily rules over language whereby man himself is subordinated to his own mastery of the objectification of language.

As a result of the inversion of language from medium to means, Benjamin proceeds with his account of the Fall, according to which the knowledge to which the snake in Paradise seduces is that of “good and evil”. To impart knowledge of good and evil plays a central role for Benjamin because it expresses a fall from the God-given language and hence an abandonment of the name. In this sense, the name “steps outside itself in this knowledge”, and as such it is something the human being gains access to only by means of a leap into the “outside [*von außen*]” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 71; 1991c, pp. 152–53). In this sense, this thought of the Fall comes to mark, for Benjamin, “the birth moment [*Geburtsstunde*] of the *human word*” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 71; 1991c, p. 153). In contrast to the community-creating word of God, Benjamin accentuates this moment of birth as a turning of time upon itself, as it were, insofar as it marks the moment in which language steps outside itself to become the human word—a moment in which “the name no longer lives intact [*unverletzt lebte*]” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 71; 1991c, p. 153). As the human word is born out of the damaged name-language, that is, that the birth of the human word is inseparable from its stepping out, there is a change in the linguistic situation, one in which the purer language of name is no longer spoken and thus becomes foreign to itself. In short, the inversion of language from medium to means implies that language serves an instrumental function inherent in the bourgeois conception of language.

While there is a kind of circularity of language, whose completion is guaranteed by the creative word of God that carries within itself “the germ [*Keim*] of the cognizing name” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 70; 1991c, p. 151; Menke 1991, p. 99), there is an interruption, where what is undivided in the name-language divides itself (*sich teilen*) in order to communicate itself (*mitteilen*). What is important here is that for Benjamin there is a sense of self-splitting of human language that opens up a space in which relations take place. As Weber puts it, it “is only in parting company with itself, in im-parting itself, that communication can take place. The ‘com-’ of communication thus presupposes the parting of imparting, which alone opens up the space ‘in’ which relations, whether social, semantic, or semiotic, can ‘take place’” (Weber 2008, p. 118). Benjamin shows then how it is from such an experience of interruption that a gap opens between the linguistic institution of the relationship between words and things.

It seems to me that this is what Benjamin has in mind when he stresses that before the Fall the human being receives the creative word of God in order to name the mute things of nature, whereas after the Fall, language no longer has its origin in God’s word; rather, by

assuming its arbitrary relationship, language is transformed into mere means and signs. Benjamin explains it as follows:

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. (Benjamin 1996c, p. 69; 1991c, p. 150)

On this understanding, Benjamin claims, as we have seen, that at the moment when the human word is born, language steps outside itself. Moreover, while the prelapsarian word only expresses itself, that is to say, in a tautegoric sense signifies itself in such a manner in which the word is not conditioned by anything outside itself, in his further discussion of the Fall, Benjamin emphasizes how the postlapsarian word imparts something—“like from the outside”—which goes beyond itself. One way in which we could approach this idea concerning the Fall is by conceiving of it as a turning of time open to an experience of “the decay [*Verfall*] of the blissful Adamite spirit of language” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 71; 1991c, p. 153). Indeed, because the human word is born at the moment when the name steps outside itself in order, so to speak, to communicate *something* “other than itself” or beyond itself, language becomes itself an outside, that is, opens itself to an outside itself, an abyss that marks the transformation of language into a means of communication, which results in further alienation from the name-language and breaks into “the plurality of languages”.

It is important to note that Benjamin is not claiming that the infralapsarian turning of time merely characterizes the violation of the blissful spirit of language according to which the immediacy of name is lost. Benjamin observes that a “new immediacy arises” where the blissful no longer rests in itself, while the task of the human being remains to name the mute things of nature. This duplicity of the linguistic situation is grounded in the difference between a prelapsarian calling things into being by their proper names bestowed by God’s creative word and a postlapsarian “overnaming”, which is a sign of “the deepest linguistic reason for all sadness and [...] for all muteness”, as well as of “the overdetermination that prevails in the tragic relationship between the languages of human speakers” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 73; 1991c, p. 156). In what follows, I shall pursue these aspects of overnaming with a particular aim of outlining Benjamin’s approach to a dialogical situation.

4. Benjamin’s Approach to a Tragic Dialogue

Let me summarize where we have got to in the account of Benjamin’s inquiry into the essence of language. We saw in the foregoing discussion of Benjamin’s explication of the Genesis that God had offered the gift of language to the human being in order for it to name the mute things of nature. This naming, Benjamin says, depends on how the thing communicates itself to the human being in order to name the thing in such a way that the human being communicates itself by naming the thing. In this way, the gift of language is not given to the human being with a pre-determined task but is for Benjamin inextricably linked to the conception (*Empfängnis*) of what remains “unnameable and nameless” in the denomination: pure language.

4.1. Naming the Unnamable

Retaining the basic idea of his inquiry into the essence of language that opens to a pure dimension of language that communicates its very communicability, as it were, Benjamin concludes his 1916 language essay by critiquing the direction in which the purpose of the bourgeois conception of language, which he had already laid out in his letter to Buber, seeks to convey a propositional content, which can be verified independently of the medium in which the content is transmitted. Against the backdrop of God’s word as a unity-creating movement of language, Benjamin argues that

the uninterrupted flow of this communication runs through the whole of nature, from the lowest forms of existence to man and from man to God. [...] The language of nature [which is imbued with a nameless, unspoken language] is

comparable to a secret password that each sentry [*Posten*] passes to the next in his own language, but the meaning [*Inhalt*] of the password is the sentry's language itself. All higher language is a translation of lower ones, until in an ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds, which is the unity of this movement made up of language. (Benjamin 1996c, p. 74; 1991c, p. 157)

In view of Benjamin's gathering up the threads of his inquiry with a kind of reprise of the creative word of God and the blissful spirit of language, it is worth repeating how the Adamite knowledge of language, which is to say how the name is given in the denomination, steps outside itself in this knowledge and thereby marks the birth moment of the human word. Before the Fall, the human being is called to respond to the task of naming that which, on the one hand, does not have a name, the unnamable and the nameless, but, on the other hand, has addressed the human being. The point of this linguistic situation is for Benjamin that by translating the mute language of nature into the name-language, an infralapsarian interruption of the relation between name-language and the mute language of nature, whose mutual kinship was guaranteed by God's creative word, has come to mean that the naming of things, that is, letting that which has no name come forward as named, implies an "over-naming" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 73; 1991c, p. 149).¹¹ In other words, just as little as the human being's naming of the nameless corresponds to God's creative word, so the mute language of nature does not correspond to the language of knowledge and names.

Yet in order for a naming to take place, it must nevertheless signal an affinity between the language of nature and the language of names. As Benjamin notes in the passage cited above, such an affinity can only be expressed in terms of translation. The premise for translation is, according to Benjamin, that the language of nature, which is itself unnamable and nameless, communicates itself to the human being who in turn names it, but only on the condition that, following Alexander García Düttmann on this point, the name given to the unnamed at the same time serves to testify to what it is not (Düttmann 2000, p. 37). If we circle back to what Benjamin tells us in his letter to Buber about the speechlessness of language—that is, the renunciation (*versagen*) of what is named *in* naming—then we can understand another dimension of denomination, namely that in relation to the demand for translation, something is added in the transfer of the nameless to the named, which is to say the knowledge that, as a supplement, turns all naming into an over-naming.

Thus, when Benjamin speaks of a "linguistic community of mute creation" with the "unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 68; 1991c, p. 149), this communal vision is premised on translation, that is, on the transfer of a lower, finite language to a higher one—until the word of God unfolds, as Benjamin says, in an ultimate clarity. The idea of translation is in this sense related to denomination insofar as that which is to be translated, and hence remains enmeshed in the unnamable and nameless, is named in relation to its other. Bearing in mind how the human word is born out of the experience of going outside the language of names, in which names are damaged and language is converted into a means for knowing something that goes beyond itself and thereby becomes a sign for communicating "*something* (other than itself)", we might suggest in relation to the postlapsarian linguistic situation that that which has been named keeps the name in the sense that the naming is itself an opening up of the naming—that is to say, to allow the name to become something other than itself (which is itself an othering of itself).¹²

If we turn back to what is at issue here, namely that the human being communicates itself by naming the mute things of nature, we come to see how Benjamin points to the special modality of communicability, according to which the suffix -ability (in German: *Mittelbarkeit*) serves to indicate how communication becomes different from what it is in that it communicates itself (Weber 2008, p. 43). However, the fact that language allows itself to be communicated, Benjamin says, always leaves a trace of the immediacy that language itself is. This trace of immediacy in the communicability of language is, to be sure, not only determined by communicating that which is communicable. It is, as previously suggested, also a "symbol of the noncommunicable" (Benjamin 1996c, p. 74; 1991c, p. 156).

Quite surprisingly, Benjamin then argues that the language of things is the medium in which its spiritual being communicates itself, that is, with “nameless, nonacoustic languages, [...] the material community of things in their communication” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 73; 1991c, p. 156) that permeates all nature. After the Fall, which at once marks the birth of human words and changes the linguistic situation, “the appearance of nature is deeply changed” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 72; 1991c, p. 155). The reason for this is that the human being denominates nature *as* mute, which is to say that the things of nature are given a name, a naming that at the same time testifies to the unnamable name. In this sense, Benjamin says, nature is, so to speak, doubling its muteness in an “other muteness [*andere Stummheit*]” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 72; 1991c, p. 155). This other muteness cannot be expressed in language, and because of this, Benjamin analyzes its “inclination to speechlessness [*Hang zur Sprachlosigkeit*]” that manifests itself in the “‘deep sadness of nature’” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 72; 1991c, p. 155; Bielik-Robson 2014, pp. 97–108; Prade-Weiss 2020, pp. 177–208).

4.2. A Double Bind of Language

Benjamin takes his analysis further and suggests that if nature were “endowed with language”, it would “begin to lament [*klagen*]” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 72; 1991c, p. 155). That nature would begin to lament if it were given a language, meaning more than an ability to speak, is not, Benjamin emphasizes, an expression of metaphysical hyperbole, but rather “a metaphysical truth”, which imposes on itself a “double sense”. First, it means that nature will “lament language itself. Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow [*Leid*] of nature” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 72; 1991c, p. 155). Second, Benjamin highlights the linguistic point that the lament is the “most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language”. Rather than an inability or disinclination to communicate, the sorrow of nature is in this sense an expression of a feeling that presents itself to be “known by the unknowable”.¹³ Benjamin himself explains this as follows: how the muteness of nature encounters the threshold of language, as it seeks to communicate itself (“even where there is only a rustling of plant”), so that the sorrow of nature results from having lost its muteness to the thing-being-given-its-own-name—that is to say, a proper name insofar as the unknowable entails what God has perfectly created.

It is noteworthy, however, that even in a prelapsarian linguistic situation—indeed, even if the “the namer is godlike and blissful”—that which has been named always retains an “intimation of mourning [*Ahnung von Trauer*]” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 73; 1991c, p. 155). As Irving Wohlfahrt (1989, p. 176) has suggested, Benjamin sketches out a kind of double bind, given that the Adamite linguistic situation represents simultaneously the redemptive power of God’s word *as well as* the intimation of mourning. Put differently, given to the human being as a task of naming it, nature is intimated with mournfulness because it is overnamed. But as such, overnaming is already determined by naming in the same way as naming is determined by overnaming (Düttmann 2000, pp. 56–57). In short, the mute things of nature are invoked by their proper names in the creative word of God, while at the same time, they are overnamed in the language of humans. There is also another moment Benjamin discusses in relation to overnaming, a moment that marks the origin of nature’s mournfulness and muteness, for which the first man, who with the “judging word” is expelled from Paradise, bears the “deepest guilt” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 71; 1991c, p. 153). This goes along with a certain emphasis Benjamin places on having received the gift of language. For insofar as it relies on being situated within the mediacy in which language communicates itself, the guilt is incurred by being unable to reproduce what has been received in the same intact, immediately creative medium of language.

As I will try to show in what follows, this determination of the linguistic situation is decisive for the manner in which Benjamin conceives of the relationship between the language(s) of human speakers. For, it is, as indicated, the essence of language to communicate itself, but “[a]ll language is only the reflection [*Reflex*] of the word in name” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 68; 1991c, p. 149). Indeed, as far as it is possible for the human being to communicate its own essence, it is done by naming things. Thus, when Benjamin seeks

to clarify his claim that “all language communicates itself”, he envisages it on the basis of its “purest sense” while at the same time recognizing that language is “the ‘medium’ of the communication”, meaning that “all language communicate itself *in* itself [*teilen sich in sich selbst mit*]” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 64; 1991c, p. 142). What I want to show now is that in Benjamin we find an approach to a dialogical situation, related to a specific view on communication (*Mitteilung*): by communicating itself, that is, to share (*teilen*) a commonality of sharing with (*mit*) someone, is at the same time to share out from the commonality of what is shared.¹⁴

4.3. On the Dialogical Situation

Thus far I have merely sketched in some of the lines of thought that characterize this dialogical situation. As I shall try to show, language is not only a means of communication, but shapes the dialogical situation to such an extent that the speaker itself becomes a medium of language. Before I proceed to explore this dialogical situation in greater detail, it is worth citing Benjamin’s implicit starting point for this, namely the *tragic*. Benjamin writes that because overnaming is “the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) for all muteness”, overnaming points to “the overdetermination [*Überbestimmtheit*] that prevails in the tragic relationship between the languages of human speakers” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 73; 1991c, pp. 155–56).

While Benjamin does not further explain what he means by the fact that languages of human speakers are permeated by a tragic relationship, he immerses himself in this problem in a text he was working on at the same time as his 1916 language essay, namely *The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy* (Benjamin 1991i, pp. 929–30). Before we delve into what this condensed and complex text deals with, it is worth adding here an introductory remark to Benjamin’s understanding of the tragic.¹⁵ If we attend to Benjamin’s habilitation thesis from 1925, keeping in mind that the 1916 text is a kind of preparatory work to it, we may see an indication that the tragic is not simply tragedy. Given that the genre of tragedy found full expression in drama plays of the fifth century BCE, the layering of this term is also historical. Still, according to Benjamin, tragedy bears witness to a certain actuality, acknowledging that it cannot be reinstalled as a whole inasmuch as it repeats itself, as it were, as something different from itself, namely as the tragic (Benjamin 1998, pp. 100–1; 1991g, p. 280).¹⁶

In a way, Benjamin seeks to outline the conditions of the tragic *after* tragedy, so to speak, conditions which concern less the mimetic capacity of language than how the tragic affects the very address of dialogue without pre-established models. In *The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy*, Benjamin indicates this much when he states the following:

The tragic is situated in the laws [*Gesetzlichkeit*] governing the spoken word [*der gesprochenen Rede*] between human beings. [...] The tragic is not just confined exclusively to the realm of dramatic human speech; it is the only form proper to human dialogue [*Wechselrede*]. That is to say, no tragedy exists outside the dialogue between humans, and the only form in which such dialogue can appear is that of tragedy. Wherever we see an “untragic” drama, the autonomous laws of human speech fail to manifest themselves; instead, we see no more than a feeling or a relationship in a linguistic context, a linguistic phase. In its pure forms, dialogue is neither sad nor comic, but tragic. [...] For sadness, unlike tragedy, is not a ruling [*waltende*] force [...]. It is merely a feeling [*Gefühl*]. (Benjamin 1996d, p. 59; 1991d, pp. 137–38)

In this passage, I argue, Benjamin is interested in the conditions of the dialogical situation. In an attempt to delineate the framework of the tragic, Benjamin collocates laws into an arrangement which applies to the spoken word between human beings. In order to understand Benjamin’s interest in these conditions, I shall look more closely at a number of distinctions that are relevant to understanding the dialogical situation as conditional upon the framework of the tragic.

The first is primarily concerned with an attempt to delimit the tragic framework of the dialogical situation by the distinction between the tragic and untragic drama. The latter is based on a representative repetition or mimetic imitation of a course of action, a pantomime, an “uncreated imitation [*Nachahmung*] of the creative word” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 71; 1991c, p. 153) that is characteristic of the mourning play. Moreover, Benjamin explains that the untragic appears only as “a feeling or a relationship in a linguistic context, a linguistic phase”, whereas the tragic drama unfolds originally against the backdrop of the “autonomous laws [*Eigenesetz*] of human speech” (Benjamin 1996d, p. 59; 1991d, p. 137). Immediately after Benjamin notes that the tragic as such cannot be reduced to a dramatization of human speech, while the tragic, which does not reflect a pre-determined structure of what it means to be in a speaking relationship with each other, is the only form proper to a dialogical situation. In particular, as I will try to show in what follows, it is in-between that the very relationship between languages of human speakers plays out.

More precisely, what Benjamin means by the tragic relationship between languages of human speakers seems first of all to be concerned with what makes the spoken word between human beings manifest. We are again faced with the question of the essence of language and not simply its context or phase. At least two things can be said about this distinction. On the one hand, Benjamin repeats the idea of nature’s sadness, which is linked to a feeling that by virtue of the “process of change [*Verwandlung*]” into words (or as Benjamin calls it in his 1916 letter to Buber, the “inner motives of the soul”) constitutes itself as the “linguistic principle of the mourning play” (Benjamin 1996d, p. 60; 1991d, p. 138). Crucial to the process of change is, as already indicated, that the lament emerges when nature is endowed with language. In this context, Benjamin refers to words as entertaining a “pure emotional life cycle in which the word “purifies [*läutert*]” itself by developing “from the natural sound to the pure sound of feeling”, and thus reduces language to a “transitional phase within the entire life cycle” (Benjamin 1996d, p. 60; 1991d, p. 138).

On the other hand, and this follows from the first point, Benjamin detects in the two words “tragedy” and “Trauerspiel” an occasion to provide a linguistic-theoretical distinction. In 1916, Benjamin argues that the *Trauer-Spiel*, shifting between sound and meaning, rests on the idea of unity that language achieves through feeling. In relation to tragedy, Benjamin adheres to the German verb *tragen* (‘to carry’). Since “word and the tragic arise together, simultaneously, on the same spot”, the word has an impact, which, in terms of “carrying its pure meaning [*reinen tragenden Bedeutung*], is tragic”. Benjamin proceeds to say that the “word as the pure bearer [*Träger*] of its meaning is the pure word” (Benjamin 1996d, p. 60; 1991d, p. 138). This notion of the pure word gestures toward what Benjamin in his 1916 letter to Buber termed *speechlessness* that, rather than an instrument of the bourgeois conception, opens language to the tragic.

A few years later, in *Goethe’s Elective Affinities* (1921–1922), Benjamin takes up the topic of the pure word explicitly. Without going into the details of this text, let me merely underline the implication to be drawn from Benjamin’s assessment of Hölderlin’s notion of the caesura as an “expressionless violence [*ausdruckslosen Gewalt*]”, which interrupts the continuum of every linguistic expression. “Such violence”, Benjamin argues, “has rarely become clearer than in Greek tragedy, on the one hand, and in Hölderlin’s hymnic poetry, on the other. Perceptible [*Vernehmbar*] in tragedy as the falling silent of the hero, and in the rhythm of the hymn as objection [*Einspruch*]” (Benjamin 1996a, p. 341; 1991a, pp. 181–82).

In the same year as Benjamin published *Goethe’s Elective Affinities*, Franz Rosenzweig published *The Star of Redemption*, from which Benjamin a few years later cites and discusses in his habilitation thesis on the silence of the tragic hero. To put it all too briefly, Rosenzweig claims that because the tragic hero only has one language that agrees with him, namely silence (*Schweigen*), the tragic coalesces into the drama in which silence can be represented (Benjamin 1998, pp. 107–9; 1991g, pp. 286–87; Rosenzweig 1990, p. 83).¹⁷

In contrast to tragic silence, the continuum of dramatic language does not allow any kind of interruption or objection. In his habilitation thesis, Benjamin identifies in a Nietzschean vein this linguistic continuum with the figure of the “*dying Socrates*”, whose

death in Plato's dialogues gives away to the unfolding of "discourse and consciousness" related to the "silent struggle [*Wortlosen Ringen*]" (Benjamin 1998, p. 113; 1991g, p. 292) of the tragic hero. In doing so, however, Socrates not only serves to illustrate the possession of an uninterrupted language; he also teaches his "youthful spokesmen" (Benjamin 1998, p. 117; 1991g, p. 297) the secret of speech as well as silence insofar as silence is embedded into the self-consciousness of Socratic irony.

Against this background, Benjamin ventures to outline his version of the tragic as an occasion to insist on the ambiguity of the "derailment of the discourse [*Entgleisen der Rede*]" (Benjamin 1998, 117; 1991g, p. 297) and the laws governing the spoken word between human beings that together constitute an occasion to speak out of silence (Menke 2015, p. 50).¹⁸ That the tragic serves as an occasion to speak out of silence, in that it signifies the derailment, objection, or interruption of the mechanism for realizing the right relationship between language and action, as Benjamin carefully explained in his letter to Buber, means, for Benjamin, that silence is born (*sich gebiert*) out of the conversation (*Gespräch*). As Benjamin remarks in *Metaphysics of Youth* (1913–1914), conversation "strives toward silence" where the silent one, the listener, remains the "unappropriated source of meaning" (Benjamin 1996b, p. 6; 1991b, p. 91) from whom the speaker receives meaning. Benjamin writes: "Whoever speaks enters the listener [*Lauschenden*]. Silence, then, is born from the conversation" (Benjamin 1996b, p. 7; 1991b, p. 92). While the conversation leads to "the edge of language", Benjamin adds, "silence is the internal frontier [*Grenze*] of conversation" (Benjamin 1996b, p. 7; 1991b, p. 92) that reveals the very mediality of language.

This allows us to conceive tragic silence not on the basis of a negation of language, not in the sense of an impossibility of speech or as a negative possibility of not-speaking, but rather in a sense of an opening up of a relatedness to the tragic experience of languages between human speakers that exceeds the individual and even the strictly naming dimension of language. Thinking of silence as an "opening up to", I argue, emphasizes an experience of the (dialogical) situation of speechlessness. It is within this silence, the internal frontier of dialogue, a frontier as that which occasions a space of encounter between speakers, where language shares itself (out) in communicating with others. Accordingly, in this respect as in the other respect I specified earlier, to say that the pure word speaks out of silence, so to speak, is to say that it must be understood in relation to the silence endured by the tragic hero who, for a caesural moment, objects to the continuum of language, albeit not as a word, but as the interruption of a propositional predication.

Bearing its tragic sense in mind, the pure word is speechless (*Wortlosen*), precisely because it does not belong to the spoken word between human speakers. The issue then, for Benjamin, is in his 1916 text on *The Role of Language in Tragedy and Trauerspiel* to show how the pure word makes every speech in the tragedy "tragically decisive" (Benjamin 1996d, p. 59; 1991d, p. 138; Sparks 2000, p. 199 ff.), while the word given in the laws governing the spoken word between human beings, as well as the "judging word [*richtenden Wort*]" expels the first human beings from Paradise", assumes the form of "sterner purity". In the 1916 language essay, Benjamin argues that the judgment (*Urteil*) presupposes the loss of the name-language, which corresponds to the knowledge of good and evil. As a result of the tragically decisive word, to which the collapse of the name-language leads, a plurality of languages emerges, in terms of which human beings are destined to speak with each other after the Fall. As the judge who judges the spoken word between human beings, as Düttmann has shown, language judges: "It judges the other. [...] Language is the judgment (*Gericht*) which has condemned man to judge the other [...]. The relationship between human languages is tragic [...] because each language judges the other" (Düttmann 2000, pp. 64–65).

How then, if at all, is it in principle possible to avoid or even provide a nonviolent resolution to conflicts between human beings, which arise because one language judges another? In *Toward the Critique of Violence* from 1921, Benjamin responds affirmatively to this question. Benjamin believes that relations between human beings sometimes bear witness to "nonviolent agreement [*Einigung*]", namely "wherever the culture of the heart

has placed pure means of accord [*Übereinkunft*] in human hands" (Benjamin 2021, p. 50; 1991h, p. 191). Indeed, nonviolent means, of which Benjamin mentions "[h]eartfelt courtesy, affection [*Neigung*], peaceableness, trust [*Vertrauen*]" as "subjective preconditions", are pure precisely because they are never used as means for immediate solutions to an end that lies outside the mediated ones (Benjamin 2021, p. 50; 1991h, p. 191; Hamacher 1994, pp. 347–48). In my view, this goes together with what Benjamin in his letter to Buber had referred to as a pure means of language that rather than serving as an instrument of political action, whereby language is denigrated to mere means to an end, marks the purest disclosure of its dignity and its essence.

On the basis of Benjamin's response, it would appear that the notion of dialogue (*Wechselrede*) arises, as I have already mentioned, in relation to the subjective preconditions of pure means, and thereby independently of the formal criteria for the exchange of meaning between individuals as it is conceived by the bourgeois conception of language. The fact that communication gives rise to conflicts between human beings, discloses, according to Benjamin, a technique (*Technik*) given before the instrumentalization of language as a means to a projected end. In this view, language is already given as a mediate form of expression wherever something is said about something. For Benjamin, the most exemplary "example" of this is the encounter or discussion (*Unterredung*), which as a "technique of civil accord [*ziviler Übereinkunft*]" expresses a "sphere of human accord that is nonviolent to such a degree that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of 'coming-to-an-understanding' [*Verständigung*], language" (Benjamin 2021, p. 50; 1991h, p. 192).

Now, as we have seen both in the letter to Buber and in the language essay, language reveals itself not to have its middle outside itself, but rather forms itself as a mediacy between the human speakers in dialogue—that is to say, a kind of linguistic betweenness without which there would be no dialogue. While mediacy, on the one hand, is the condition of possibility for the bourgeois conception of language, the pure language of mediacy is, on the other hand, the interruption of mediacy.

Exactly at this point, Benjamin's analysis opens the field for a consideration of the dialogical situation. If dialogue is reduced to its simplest form, that is, the back and forth of speech and counterspeech, then silence does not initially respond to the alternation of the conversation (*Wechselrede*) between one speaker's relation to the other—indeed, the transition from the first-person perspective to a second-person perspective. In speaking out of silence, the speaker does not become silent for the other, in that silence is not performed within a pre-established dialogical relationship, but rather, as indicated, marks its internal frontier.¹⁹

From this vantage point, the other receives an address from an other than the other "you" whom "I" call forth in the alternation of the dialogical situation (Waldenfels 1971, p. 139; Theunissen 1977, p. 286). What is dispatched and received is not the communication of a message or a propositional content which is transmitted through an exchange between the speakers, but rather the very movement of communicability (*Mittelbarkeit*) towards the other. My claim follows Benjamin's proposed definition of language as communication (*Mitteilung*), meaning that language communicates itself insofar as it imparts and divides itself without anything having taken place that would have been itself, its essence. In other words, this communication is not reducible to an imparting that originates from a common middle term, in that communicability does not exist within an already given language medium.

Thus, when Benjamin rhetorically asks *what* language communicates, and answers that it communicates the spiritual being insofar as that which in a spiritual being is communicable *is* its language, it depends on *how* the medium ("dieses Mittelbare") of communicability is immediately language itself (Benjamin 1996c, p. 64; 1991c, p. 142). Or, to put it differently, insofar as language is "conditional on its immediacy", nothing is communicated *through* it; rather, as we have seen, all language is linked to an incommensurability that keeps it infinitely open to a coming that no presence of language can contain. If language is the medium in which everything is communicated, as Benjamin argues, the medium of

communication is not itself a mediation. As we have seen, language is in every case also, at the same time, a “symbol of the noncommunicable”; that is, it is that which cannot be mediated cognitively, but whose incommensurability afflicts language and with it all measure (Hamacher 2020, p. 118). It is on this condition that Benjamin’s advance toward a “pure mediacy” becomes a middle term for the dialogical situation.

I would like to conclude by saying that to talk about dialogue is itself to talk from within an in-between of dialogue, in which something emerges that neither “I” nor “you”, “dispatcher” or “receiver”, have invoked, insofar as these instances of dialogue are not pre-constituted subjects, but rather are constituted by the middle term as mediated. What emerges from the pure mediacy, which, as the middle term of the dialogue, is not derived from an end goal placed outside of mediacy, is the space of encounter or conversation: *language*. As this pure mediacy, language not only puts itself forth, but also imparts itself by sharing itself out in the dialogical situation. Language imparts itself by speaking about itself as that which always arrives, as that which has not yet arrived and thus has always yet to come.

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Notes

- ¹ The two thinkers had already met in Berlin where Benjamin, on 23 June 1914, gave a lecture at the Freie Studentenschaft, where he also engaged in a discussion of Buber’s dialogue *Daniel* (1913). In a letter to Herbert Blumenthal, on 6 May 1914 (Benjamin 1994, p. 62; 1995, p. 218), as well as in a letter to Ernst Schoen, on 23 May 1914, Benjamin notes that Buber’s dialogue “is not well thought out [*undurchdacht*]” (Benjamin 1994, p. 68; 1995, p. 231).
- ² All references to Benjamin’s texts will be indicated by year of publication followed by the English and German pagination. Translations are sometimes silently modified.
- ³ Samuel Brody has argued that Buber’s “support for the war” is less to be seen as “a nationalistic assertion of Germany’s right to rule Europe” and more as an “all-encompassing, quasi-mystical *Erlebnis*” (Brody 2018, p. 38).
- ⁴ For a discussion, see (Gasché 2002, pp. 51–68; Menninghaus 2002, pp. 19–50).
- ⁵ What Benjamin seeks to uncover is the language of language; that is to say, language is about that which turns it into language, without, however, ascribing to language a pre-given system of meanings (cf. Derrida 1982, p. 162; 1987, p. 219 ff.).
- ⁶ Benjamin’s modulation of relationship bears resemblance with Buber’s distinction between the *Ich-Es-Verhältnis* and the *Ich-Du-Beziehung* (Buber 1970, p. 111 ff.; Theunissen 1977, pp. 262–64).
- ⁷ This passage requires philological accuracy. While Scholem’s and Adorno’s selection of Benjamin’s letters from 1966 says “unsagbarer reiner Macht” (Benjamin 1966, p. 127), which is the basis for the English translation currently available, Göddes’ and Lonitz’s three-volume publication of Benjamin’s correspondence says “unsagbar reiner Nacht” (Benjamin 1995, pp. 326–27). An analysis of Benjamin’s manuscript shows that he did indeed write “Nacht”, which underscores the difficulty of orienting oneself in a darkness so unutterably pure that it threatens to obscure with sameness everywhere (Richter 2023, pp. 171–72). Whilst Richter alludes to both Kant and Hegel, Jensen (2018, p. 240) proceeds more cautiously on this point, recognizing the open question of whether Benjamin honors Hegel, Hölderlin, or German Romanticism, and connects with the essays on *The Image of Proust* (1923), *Robert Walser* (1929), and *Karl Kraus* (1930).
- ⁸ Even though it cannot be decided in advance or internal to Benjamin’s text, allow me to note in passing that the “night” as a philosophical image or concept endows Benjamin with a somewhat unclarified contribution to the history of philosophy. If we look back, for example, at Schelling’s (2012, pp. 220–21) early philosophy of identity (1802), we find an exemplary way of seeing the night as nothing more than the “pure night” in which nothing can be recognized, and which Hegel pursues at the same time in his *Difference* essay (Hegel 1977, pp. 93–97) and more famously later in his preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 2018, p. 10), where he states that in this night “are all cows black [*alle Kühe schwarz sind*]”.

- ⁹ In a similar vein, Heidegger (1985, p. 11) analyzes Hamann’s abyssal question of language.
- ¹⁰ Although the linguistic situation before the Fall is usually associated with unity, Benjamin reads a prelapsarian division out of the Genesis inasmuch as Adam not simply names the animals, but also names another one of his own kind: Eve. Acknowledging the discrepancy between the two versions of creation, Benjamin observes that the name Eve does not derive from Eve in that “the name is already divided between names in the proper sense of the word and proper names, which does not derive from the language of the thing named” (Fenves 2011, pp. 144–45).
- ¹¹ Even if the “paradisiacal language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 71; 1991c, p. 152), Benjamin adds that the “absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God” (Benjamin 1996c, p. 68; 1991c, p. 148).
- ¹² This becoming other of the name bears a similarity, I argue, to the *inversion* that Theunissen describes from the appropriation of the other to the alteration (*Veränderung*) of “itself”, whereby the dialogical facticity comes to imply that the human being not merely returns to itself by incorporating the other, but rather that its being always already caught up in becoming other serves as an occasion to become itself (Theunissen 1977, p. 490).
- ¹³ As Düttmann puts it: “Melancholic mutism is a lament and the lament is the wordless word of mutism” (Düttmann 2000, p. 53).
- ¹⁴ This notion of communication has above all been underlined by Nancy (1982) and Hamacher (1994).
- ¹⁵ Whether or not Benjamin’s thought is tragic opens up avenues of analysis that extend well beyond the confines of this article. Suffice it here to note that even if tragedy has had its day, the history concerning the tragedy of philosophy, as Szondi (1979, p. 200) has suggested, may not be entirely separated from the tragic.
- ¹⁶ In this article, I shall not undertake the task of dealing with the connection between the 1916 text and Benjamin’s habilitation thesis, let alone another 1916 text, entitled *Trauerspiel and Tragedy*. For a discussion, see Weber (2015, pp. 88–114), Sagnol (2003, pp. 119–230), Ferber (2013).
- ¹⁷ In reading Benjamin and Rosenzweig together, Bielik-Robson has suggested that silence is a form of speech appropriate to the tragic hero in whom silence resides in lamentation, and where the function of the chorus, according to Rosenzweig, breaks into the outer world as a call “addressed to the figure that is as mute as marble” (Rosenzweig 1990, p. 230; Bielik-Robson 2014, pp. 96–99).
- ¹⁸ Starting from Benjamin’s epochal determination of the tragedy (Benjamin 1991g, p. 314), Fenves (2001, p. 243) argues that the “arrested language of tragedy constitutes an unprecedented discontinuity”, where the “discontinuing of this discontinuity begins with Socrates, who interrupts the tragic interruption”.
- ¹⁹ Hamacher (2020, pp. 114–16) has proposed rethinking silence as a relation to the failure of the “homeostasis between inside and outside”, a failure that is endemic to an “experience with being-without-language”. In this silence, language “divides itself and communicates with the other”, such that there is in every language of communication something that cannot be made common, “something undialogical and without language”.

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