Walter Benjamin, “The Japanese story …”

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In her oft-quoted characterization of Walter Benjamin’s thought,1 Hannah Arendt remarks that a particularly difficult trait of Benjamin was that he “thought poetically” and kept turning concepts into metaphors. According to Arendt, “metaphor” had to be understood in the original sense of *metapherin*, “to carry over” (*herübertragen*). Through this “carrying over” or “transfer” (*Übertragung*), Benjamin reinstated the “sensual base” of words “from the sphere of superstructure” (61). Similarly, Adorno asserts that “in contrast to all other philosophers,” Benjamin’s thinking “did not take place in the conceptual realm,” but instead “wrested away the theoretical, spiritual content [*Gehalt*] from nonconceptual details and tangible moments” (*Vermischte Schriften* 177). Whether “carrying over” from the conceptual “superstructure” or “wresting away” from the nonconceptual “detail,” Arendt and Adorno both seem to suggest — albeit from different directions — a form of movement or shift within the language of the text into a medial, neither fully conceptual nor metaphorical space. If this operating beyond the opposites of concept and metaphor — what has otherwise been termed Benjamin’s “thinking in images” (*Bilddenken*) — may be seen as one constituent feature of Benjamin’s thought, the fragmentary and unsystematic aspect of his work has also frequently been pointed out.2

The fragment, as fragment of, gestures to that which is beyond its boundaries. As fundamentally multiple, it writes itself through correspondences and the interweaving of motifs into a kind of constellation with Benjamin’s other texts. Just as his thinking in images renders Benjamin’s texts resistant to smooth paraphrase and translation,3 their fragmentary character defies easy summarization. To
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a higher degree than those of other authors, Benjamin’s writings thus appear to demand commentary. This is notably so in the case of his “interpolations in the most minuscule” (Adorno, Noten zur Literatur 570) which are marked by the mode of association that Gershom Scholem describes in his diary in an exercise of the form: “Theory and Thora have the same consonants. The smallest abyss is the largest. Here I hide in a play of words a racing series of ideas, which I do not even hazard to hint at, which only resonates when I think it [the series of ideas]” (quoted in Sauter 96).

In this essay, I want to examine a brief note that Benjamin jotted down sometime in the first half of 1933, shortly after the National Socialists’ seizure of power, and after he had journeyed to Ibiza, commencing life in exile. During his stay on the island,4 Benjamin revised a text he had put to paper at the beginning of the year, “Doctrine of the Similar.” Unable to consult his papers in Berlin, he requested Scholem to send him a copy of his earlier essay, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” in order to compare it with this “second work on language” (GB IV 223), which he then rewrote under the title “On the Mimetic Faculty.” Likely composed in May or June 1933 in close temporal proximity with these revisions and the rethinking of the problem of language,5 the note, I argue, may be read as a picture puzzle returning to and anticipating, connecting to and grafting onto Benjamin’s theory of language. The purpose of this reading is thus also to probe Benjamin’s thoughts on writing and reading, condensed in “On the Mimetic Faculty” in the perplexing phrase (borrowed from Hoffmannsthal): “What never was written, to read” (II.1.213; SW2 722).

1.
It is possible to perceive an instance of what Arendt calls the “sensualisation” of the “superstructure” in Benjamin’s rejection of a critical comment by Gretel Karplus about his exposé for the Arcades
Project. In her letter, Karplus makes use of the word “hand” to express authorship, a personal style or a characteristic way of thinking, remarking that one could not sense “WB’s hand” in the draft he had sent (V.2.1141; CA/B 157). Benjamin responds by taking her at her word. “WB has … two hands,” he declares and goes on to explain that at the age of fourteen he had spent hours training to write with his left hand; he had recently resumed this same writing lesson in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, only “on a higher scale” (GB V 151; CA/B 159). Benjamin seems to translate the metaphor into its literal “sensual” meaning only to return it, in the next moment, to the “superstructure” with his reference to a “higher scale.” Yet by referring to both his exposé writing and his left-handed writing as “writing like that” (so zu schreiben), he also points to a dimension where medium and content, writing as motor movement of the hand and writing as mental operation are not disconnected, but are part of one and the same learning process. Just as the writing involved the hand, this process literally involved the body, as it was a “training course” (Lehrgang), that is, a “walk” (Gang).

If writing might conventionally be contrasted with a bodily activity such as walking, as the latter is learned more or less naturally while the first is culturally acquired, Benjamin once and again reflects on their connectedness. In one of his notes on graphology, he stresses the “importance of the handwriting norm (of the model taught at school [Schulvorbild]),” which constituted a “virtual pre-design” (virtuelle Vorzeichnung) of the actual writing (VI.185). For Benjamin, however, this does not so much confirm the cultural constructedness of writing but rather points to its mimetic “image” (Bild) character, to its kinship with drawing (Zeichnung), and to the mimetic faculty of the child. In his review of Anja and Georg Mendelssohn’s book on graphology, he enthusiastically quotes the observation that at some point in children’s development the letters stood on the line, just as the people or animals
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in their drawings stood on the ground (III.138; SW2 133). By foregrounding the corporeal aspects in his recurrent reflections on writing, Benjamin’s emphasis thus seems to be on what is communicated “in” rather than “through” script. Writing related to the body not solely because it was the material outcome of bodily activity but because it paralleled the expressiveness of the body. Not only was it comparable to walking as a form of motor movement, but it could be compared to the gait (Gang). Its physiognomic character, according to Benjamin, differed from the gait, and gestures and facial expressions, only in its “altitude” (Höhenlage) (VI.185).

The correlation of writing and walking reappears in one of the sketches in One-Way Street, where Benjamin contrasts the copying out and the reading of a text by comparing it to the difference between walking on a country road and flying over it in an airplane. One learned more about the landscape and the road when wandering along it rather than just seeing it from above (IV.1.90; SW1 447-448). With the intermediary of copying (abschreiben), the thought image implies a difference between writing (schreiben) and reading, that does, however, not constitute a categorical disjunction. The copying of the text differed from mere reading not just because it slowed down the reading, as it forced the eye to wait for the hand to accomplish its task. The copier — through the innervations of his hand — was in physical contact with the writing, in the same manner as the wanderer stood with his feet on the ground. By contrast, the reading was at a remove from the text, advanced with a higher speed, and offered a different vista. And yet, just as flying in an airplane also implied physical movement and corporeal involvement, reading and copying did not take place in different dimensions, but ensued in the same space, — only at different “altitudes.” Rather than detaching writing as cognitive process from script as mere material trace or carrier, Benjamin places it in a continuity with walking, gesturing, drawing, and copying, thereby
linking the writing body with the body of writing. While unfolding in a different “altitude” or another “scale,” reading did not efface this physiognomic aspect of writing either. The script, Benjamin submits, does “not fall away like dross,” but “into what is read, it enters as its ‘figure’” (I.1.388; OGT 233).

In a piece of *Berlin Childhood*, published for the first time in July 1933 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Benjamin recalls his own learning to read by making use of a “reading box.” The box contained the letters on little tablets, which “the hand,” “the right one,” lined up to form words. These letters were not in classical Roman script, however. They were “in German script, in which they looked younger and more girlish than in print” (IV.1.267; SW3 396). Benjamin himself made use of “German script” or *Kurrent* — the handwriting norm or “pre-figuration” (*Vorbild*) taught in schools until 1941 — in most of his notes and manuscripts, although he would smoothly switch to Latin script or Antiqua when composing letters or writing in French. Not only discovering human figures in the script’s letters but ascribing a youthful age and female gender to it and contrasting it with typeface, Benjamin seems to indirectly liken the conversion into print to deflation. The handwriting’s translation into print thus involved a loss, an alteration of the “figure” of what is read. This might be seen to be relevant to Benjamin’s own work, insofar as a major part of it was not transcribed, typed, or published during his lifetime but survived only in the form of handwritten notes. A reading of these fragmentary texts, which according to Antoine Berman are nonetheless to be considered “absolutely replete and ‘concluded’” “definitive sketches” (25), might then start by retracing the original “figure” of the writing.

2.

On the backside of one of the loose sheets of paper with notes Benjamin took in 1933 while in Ibiza is a short notation that consists
of two paragraphs, eight lines in total. The text is struck through by a vertical line and two shorter diagonal lines.

The three black strokes do not render the text illegible, but neither do they add anything to the text. They might to be seen to mark what has already been read, or what does not need to be read anymore. In the collected works, the text of the two paragraphs is transferred to Antiqua, set in italic type, and enclosed in braces (VII.2.846). Through its transcription, not only is the text thus transferred from handwriting into typeface, from German script to Antiqua, the erasure of the text is also translated into punctuation marks. On the other hand, the shorter horizontal line which crosses out a combination of letters in the penultimate line, not making up a complete word, “Leitun,” is not substituted in print. While the editors have replaced the erasure of the text by parentheses and have recovered the erased text, they have deleted the erasure of the letter combination. The reproduction in the collected writings/scripts (Gesammelte Schriften) thus renders the handwriting legible, yet what it thereby reestablishes and again gives to read is the text and the word, not the letter.

3.
The first line of the note begins with an indication or annunciation of the content of the following lines, literally: “collection of tasks to
think” (*Sammlung von Denkaufgaben*). What follows is a list of terms and expressions which mostly refer to known mathematical problems or summarize ideas Benjamin used to make up riddles. The next five lines consist of running text instead of single words, but the vertical slash drawn over the middle of the note seems to mark them as part of the “collection.”


The Japanese story of the cliff of suicides. In order to protect the reputation of the country in which was situated the cliff from which the life-weary jumped down, a high voltage wire was strung in front of it. On a warning plate was written: “Forbidden to touch, danger of life.”

The *Denkaufgabe* of the “Japanese story” does not prima facie contain a question or problem or present a riddle, but rather — in the most condensed form possible — tells a witty, ironical tale. The “task” (*Aufgabe*) of the *Denkaufgabe*, however, recalls the “task of the translator.” *Aufgabe* can evoke a duty or responsibility, but in the terminological cosmos which Benjamin shares with the Romantics, it is connected to the term *Auflösung*, solution, in the logical sense (dissolution), the chemical sense (dissolution), or in the sense of musical harmony (resolution) (Berman 40). Also, for the Romantics, wit was a “logical chemistry” or a “chemical … spirit” (I.1.49; SW1 140/141). Wit dissolves things and words out of their habitual order and, without altering them as such, arranges them in a new, unlikely
sequence. As both “task” and witty tale, the Denkaufgabe thus seems to gesture towards translation, but it is also reminiscent of the game Benjamin describes in the prose miniature “Pretzel, Feather, Pause, Lament, Clowning” composed around the same time. In this game, a set of disconnected words were prescribed which then had to be joined into a sentence without changing the order and with the least possible intervening clauses. Every act of reading, Benjamin observes, contained something of the inversion of the game, of looking at a sentence as if it had been constructed in that manner. Just as the word rather than the sentence constituted the primary element or the “arcade” through which the translator approached the language of the original (IV.1.18; SW1 260), commentaries of sacred texts, according to Benjamin, fixated on the words, “as if they were set according to the rules of the game and assigned as a task to resolve” (IV.1.433; SW2 726). A reading of the “Japanese story” might then, — following Benjamin’s prescription —, also begin with the words and their arrangement within the sentence as its primary “task to resolve.”

A story is mentioned, but no narrator. The first sentence lacks a verb. The nominal sentence usually does not present a narrative but establishes an absolute, a general, timeless relationship (Benveniste 165). “The Japanese story” thus commences but waits to be told. Nonetheless it is a story about, “of” (vom) something, a rock, — perhaps a cliff. According to Grimm’s German dictionary, fels, the rock, is a specifically High German word that makes frequent appearance in Luther’s translation of the Bible. Because the solidness of fels engenders the notion of shielding and protecting, Luther uses the word as an “abstraction, where the text and the vulgate use other expressions.” Thus, for example, Luther renders “firmamentum meum” as “Lord, my fels” (1499-1501). Yet the Japanese story is about a fels of suicides. It gives refuge to the Selbstmörder, a person who “murders” himself by leaping from the rock.
The second sentence is a complex sentence with multiple subordinate clauses. The rock or cliff, from which the “life-weary” jump refers back to the “rock of suicides.” A wire (Draht) is strung (ziehen) in front of it (davor), but the mastermind — the “wire-puller” (Drahtzieher) — behind the wire remains anonymous. Instead, the purpose of the wire is made explicit. It serves “to protect” (um ... zu schützen). Protection is meant to keep something safe from injury or outside intrusion. What the wire protects, however, is the “reputation” (Renommee), the reputation of the area, or more precisely, the “country.” While the rock and the wire are situated “within,” the “reputation of the country” is the evaluation of the country outside of itself. The purpose of the wire appears to be fraught with ambiguity. It is strung inside to protect the reputation outside. It thus also seems to be strung in front of the rock (davor) not so much to protect (schützen) but to make a pretext (vorschützen).

The third and last sentence again stops to narrate. It declares what “stands” still, that is, what “was written” (stand), it quotes. The sentence quotes a “warning” sign which, however, articulates a prohibition rather than a warning. The writing of the sign forbids to “touch.” Between the touch (berühren) and the prohibition (verboten), is “danger,” “risk of life” (Lebensgefahr). As the preposition bei generally conveys spatial proximity and contact, temporal synchronicity or surrounding circumstances, in another context bei Lebensgefahr may simply be translated as “in life-threatening circumstances.” However, next to prohibitions, it is the punishment that gets connected with “bei” (Paul 106). Just as, in Benjamin’s essay on Karl Kraus, “punishment” (Strafe) resonates within “language” (Sprache), when “code of penal procedure” (Strafprozessordnung) turns into a “code of linguistic procedure” (Sprachprozessordnung) (II.1.349; SW2 443), within the expression “forbidden at the risk of life” (bei Lebensgefahr verboten) resounds the turn of phrase “bei
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*Strafe verboten,*” which the Duden simply explains as “… is punished” (1703). Through similarity in sound and writing, *bei Lebensgefahr verboten* therefore reads as “… is punished by death.” Since the prohibition “to touch” refers back to the “high voltage wire” of the preceding sentence, the suicide — the *Selbstmörder* — who was in life-threatening circumstances is thus punished with death for endangering his life, — by way of electrocution.

Taken as a task for commentary and read word for word, Benjamin’s “Japanese story” leads not to harmonious resolution but to tension between word and sentence, to a series of ironical inversions: what is meant to be shelter is used for “murder,” what is protected is not the inside, but the outside, what is supposed to protect is making a pretext, what is assumed to declare a warning pronounces punishment. And the irony is not just contained within the text, it also encroaches on the outside of the text, on another text. It evokes through quotation. Practicing the “art of citing without quotation marks” (V.1.572; AP 458), — but within quotation marks —, it quotes without warning, — within a “warning sign.” That is, just as *fels* pointed to Luther, the “to touch” of the warning sign calls up the word by which Luther translates *tangere: (an)rühren.*\(^{12}\)


And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden. But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it,
neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. (King James Version, Gen. 3:2-3, my emphasis)

With the prohibition “to touch,” the “Japanese story” not only quotes Luther’s translation from Latin, but it quotes the holy script quoting Eve quoting God: “And the woman said … God hath said …” “Touch” is also, as Samuel Weber has pointed out, the one word that God (who only warns about eating the forbidden fruit and threatens death) has actually not said, which makes it the very first misquotation or mistranslation in the Western tradition (69). And only afterwards God drives man out of the Garden of Eden “lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever” (Gen. 3:22, my emphasis). The ironical intertext that emerges from this textual contact zone of “touch” and “hand” is not a coincidental one. It can equally be observed in one of the short pieces from One-Way Street.

The author lays the idea on the marble table of the café. Lengthy observation, for he makes use of the time before the arrival of the glass, the lens through which he examines the patient. Then, deliberately, he unpacks his instruments: fountain pens, pencil, and pipe. The numerous clientele, arranged in an amphitheater, make up his clinical audience. Coffee, carefully poured and consumed, puts the idea [Gedanke] under chloroform. What this idea is directed at [sinnt] has no more connection with the matter at hand than the dream of an anesthetized patient has with the surgical intervention. With the cautious lineaments of handwriting, the operator makes incisions, displaces internal accents, cauterizes proliferations of words, inserts a foreign term as a silver rib. At last, the whole is finely stitched together with punctuation, and
he pays the waiter, his assistant, in cash. (IV.131; SW1 475-476)

The sketch provides a double vision. The writer is performing a surgery (cheirūrgía), i.e. he is applying his hands (chéir) to work (érgon). The words, accents, and punctuation he is manipulating in his handwriting relate to the idea just like the bodily tissue of the anaesthetized patient relates to the patient’s consciousness. Or more accurately, the “sensing” (sinnen) of the thought (Gedanke) is compared to the patient’s dream content. The opposition here is not one between matter and mind, but between the body organs and dream and waking consciousness. After the surgery is finished, the patient can wake up and recall where he is. When the writing is done, the text can be read, and the “idea” retrieved. But both involve inevitable loss and forgetting. The miniature not only describes a series of complementary opposites, author and surgeon, patient and text, writing and operating, reading and remembering, but this double picture conceals a third. This is the intertext which is called forth by the single word “rib.”

And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, … he … brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman. (Gen. 2:21-23)

The scene of the writer who inserts the “silver rib” of the foreign term evokes the story of Genesis, but at the same time ironizes it. The transposition of images puts Adam under chloroform and makes God perform surgery, while the writer-surgeon turns God’s operation inside out, inserting instead of extracting the rib, substituting the own instead of creating a new other. Yet the foreign term, removed from the
seemingly “god-given,” natural, organic language of the “mother tongue,” nonetheless gestures, in spite of or precisely due to this remove, toward the Adamic language and Adam’s originary naming. It is thus not only the prohibition to “touch” which refers the “Japanese story” back to Genesis. For not only does the “Japanese story” contain a foreign term. The word extracted from the French language and inserted into and “protected” within the “Japanese story” is the noun Renommée which retains within it the word for “name,” nom. The “Japanese story” therefore not only calls up the story of Genesis, but also the text in which Benjamin retells and interprets the Genesis chapters of the Bible and develops his theory of language as an incessant thinking of the “name.”

4. “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” (1916) evokes the relation between “the mental essence of a thing” and “its language.” Benjamin emphasizes that the “mental essence that communicates itself [sich ... mitteilt] in language” was to be distinguished from “language itself,” as the hypothesis of their identity was “the great abyss into which all theory of language threatens to fall, and to maintain itself just floating over the abyss is its task” (II.1.141; SW1 63). Rejecting the hypothesis and thus “floating over the abyss” for close to half of the essay, the second part of the text nonetheless tells a story of identity or continuity and of a fall, — the story of Creation, the naming God performs and after him Adam and man’s expulsion from paradise as it is recounted in the first chapters of Genesis. The goal, however, is not to interpret the Bible as such, but to detect “that which emerges of itself out of the Bible text with regard to the nature of language” (II.1.147; SW1 67).

According to Benjamin, in the “Let there be” at the beginning and the “He named” at the end of the act of God’s creation of nature,
“the deep, clear relation of the act of creation to language appears every time” (II.1.148; SW1 68). In God, language is that which creates as Word and that which completes as name. The name which completes is identical to the creating word. The name is creative, and the word is cognizant. However, this absolute relationship to cognition exists only in God. “God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge” (II.1.148; SW1 68). While there is a border between the cognizing name of man and the creative word of God, through naming, Adam’s paradisiac naming participates in the divine infinity of God’s Word. Benjamin quotes Hamann: “Everything that man heard in the beginning, saw with his eyes, … and felt with his hands, was … the living word; for God was the word” (II.1.151; SW1 69). He calls the Adamic naming also the “translation of the language of things into that of humans.” Human language takes part in a “continuum of transformations” in which “every higher language (with the exception of the Word of God) can be regarded as the translation of all the others” (II.1.150-151; SW1 69-70). Benjamin thus distinguishes Adam’s naming from the fallen human word that communicates something (etwas mitteilt). The fall “marks the birth of the human word, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language” (II.1.153; SW1 71). The knowledge of good and evil, with which the snake seduces Eve, is “nameless,” it is the only evil in the paradisiacal state. As name “steps outside itself” (II.1.153; SW1 71), thing and language are distinguished. “The word must communicate something (other than itself).” The word as something externally communicating turns against man. The knowledge of good and evil gives rise to “the judging word,” which “punishes” and expels man from paradise. After the fall, language then becomes a means and “at least in part, a mere sign” (II.1.153; SW1 71). This ultimately results in the plurality of languages. While in God things have one name, they become “over-named” by human languages.
While the paradisiacal state knew only one language, after the fall language becomes mediate. It multiplies, and linguistic confusion ensues.

Benjamin’s interpretation of the Genesis may offer a figure against which the “task” of the “Japanese story” can be thought. The “high-voltage wire” is strung in the midst of the “country,” just as the tree of knowledge stands in the Garden of Eden. It abolishes the prelapsarian state when “everything that man … touched with his hands, was … the living word.” It institutes a prohibition which withholds “judgment” (“… is punishable by death”). The irony of the warning sign, that it addresses those “in life-threatening circumstance” (the “life-weary”) and at the same time sentences them to death is equal to the “immense irony” of the tree of knowledge which “stood in the garden of God not in order to dispense information on good and evil, but as an emblem of judgement over the questioner” (II.1.154; SW1 72). The Japanese story has its “questioners,” the “life-weary,” and they are condemned as Selbstmörder. “The magic of judgement” is a “new immediacy” (II.1.153; SW1 71-72), and in the Japanese story the judgment implies immediate execution, as touching is punishable by electrocution. The “new immediacy” replaces the “immediacy of the name,” it makes language into a “means.” In fact, it is a means “to protect.” What it protects is Renommée, — derived from the French noun renommée which is formed from the past participle of renommer. The verb nommer applies equally to the creation of the name and to its subsequent use (Genette 338) while the prefix re- introduces the value of substitution into the term. Re- is the new, the “again” and the “in place of,” it marks a difference from the original. It leaves the one, the same. Thus, in Renommee, “name steps outside itself” (II.1.153; SW1 71). As a form of repetition, it culminates in multiplication. If re-means again, it also means “over and over again,” and renommer becomes over-naming. And just as it is “protected” by the high-voltage
wire, *Renommee* also speaks the same language as the warning sign, since “there exists a fundamental identity between the word that, … knows good and evil, and the externally, communicating word” (II.1.153; SW1 71).

When “On Language as Such …” summarizes the “threefold significance” of the fall “for the essential composition of language” (II.1.152; SW1 71), one might thus think this along the three sentences of the Japanese story. First, man steps out of the language of the name, language becomes a means “in order to …” (*um ... zu*), resulting in the plurality of languages (*Renommee*). Second, in exchange for the immediacy of name (*Berühren*), a new immediacy, the magic of judgement (... *bei Lebensgefahr verboten*), arises. And thirdly, the fall is the source of abstraction. It is therefore not just the entrance of mankind into history (*Geschichte*), but at the same time the opening of the possibility of the syntactical complexity of storytelling (*Geschichte*). And insofar as Benjamin interprets the Babylonian confusion of tongues as an immediate outcome of the fall, this story or history can only be told in a particular language. The stringing of the high-voltage wire, which puts in place the judgment, is therefore ultimately at the origin of the “Japanese story” itself. What it protects is not just the reputation, *Renommee*, but the reputation or new naming of the country, *Renommee der Gegend*. Grammatically ambivalent, “der Gegend” vacillates between subjective and objective genitive, of the country or by the country. *Renommee* can hence be both the reputation or assessment, the designation of the country from outside, as well as the renaming, the *Renommee* common to the country, its idiom, the new naming and designating as it is practiced within the country, — “Japanese” (*japanisch*). Both, however, amount to the same: the incessant multiplication and fragmentation of name and language. The Japanese story itself may then also be subject to the logic of “*re-nommer,*” renewal, replacement, — the law of translation. “*Re-*”
marks not only the aspect of substitution, the “in the place of” of translation, but also the “anew” and “over again” in the modality of time. The “Japanese story” would thus be caught up in the “history of Japanese (language),” as the text is constant renewal even in its own language. Benjamin notes this transforming movement which divides languages and breaks them up from within in the “Task of the translator”: “Just as tone and meaning of the great literary works change completely over the centuries, so too does the translator’s mother tongue” (IV.1.13; SW1 256).

If “Japanese” signals the multiplicity and particularity of language, it may, however, not just be a stand-in for any other particular language (French, Russian etc.), for what Benjamin rejects is precisely the use of words as “mere signs.” As it evokes distance, “Japan,” — beyond reiterating the topos of the Orient as radically other and strangely familiar counter-world —, might qualify the “story” as story, since, according to Benjamin, the story — different from information’s indication of the nearest and plausible — comes from faraway places and relates the extraordinary and marvellous (II.2.444-445; SW3 147). Yet for Benjamin distance and proximity are dialectically related. It is a dialectic that issues from the single word, as in the quotation from Karl Kraus: “the closer you look at a word, the more distantly it looks back” (II.1.362; SW2 453). Jean Selz, who worked with Benjamin on a translation of Berlin Childhood into French while in Ibiza in 1933, recalls that Benjamin “would sometimes linger over a word, considering it from all sides, and in doing so, often discovered in its individual syllables an unexpected meaning” (208).14

According to Benjamin, it is, however, not only new meanings that emerge. As he remarks in a fragment, “it is strange, that upon looking at a word multiple times, the intention directed towards its meaning may be lost” (VI.15, my emphasis). Like language, the single word is not immune against transformation by repetition. The repeated reading
or pronouncing (renommer) of the word may efface its meaning and dissolve it into its — phonetic, lexical, semantic or morphological — elements. This other form of reading, one that includes the relinquishing (Aufgabe) of sense, may then prompt another (dis)solution.

5.
In an early fragment, Benjamin tells the story of a man who has fallen asleep during a hike in the mountain forest, and who, after waking up in the twilight of the evening, and commencing his descent into the valley, is assailed by hallucinations. The man senses an “other,” a “magic” that rules (walten) in the forest. He gradually loses control over himself, acting first “reluctantly,” then “unwillingly,” then “against his will” (VII.2.640). He hears voices, echoes of his own thoughts, his perception seems to trick him. The familiar turns foreign, the inorganic becomes alive. Proportions shift, part becomes whole. “The more he forced himself to see, the stranger it became. The stone along the path seemed to grow — seemed to speak. All relations became other. All the details turned into a landscape, into a large picture” (VII.2.640). The border between internal and external perceptions, mere sound and human language dissolves, the spheres merge, they rhyme: “More distinctly than before, out of wordless song the voice spoke: dream and tree [Traum und Baum]” (VII.2.640).

Overtaken by fear, the man dashes into the thicket of the forest, “where he had to be, … where someone was, who made all things other,” until he falls and cries “like a child who hears a stranger approach in dream” (VII.2.641). This stranger is mentioned by name only in the title: “Pan of the Evening.”

What Benjamin thus depicts in literary form is an attack by Pan, the Greek god of forests and plains. Pan disturbs and disorients. He rushes out of the limits of organized space and to a place where directions disappear or reappear. The music he plays turns from
communication to acoustic disorder. In Greek medical terminology, panic rapture is a condition of alienation that can display a range of effects from epilepsy to melancholy, from fear that repels to intrusion that deranges. Pan invades his victim, deceives him about his object and about himself, ultimately evicting the individual from his identity. By panic, he atomizes a social group, fragments it. Attacked by Pan, an army divides into antagonistic camps, as in panic the soldier cannot recognize his own people or his own language (Borgeaud 88-129). If Pan shifts the boundary between self and other, unsettles all sense, and makes language unintelligible, it is, however, not because he is opposed to language, but because he is so closely related to it.

Soc. You know that speech makes all things (πᾶν) known and always makes them circulate and move about, and is twofold, true and false.
Her. Certainly.
Soc. Well, the true part is smooth and divine and dwells aloft among the gods, but falsehood dwells below among common men, is rough and like the tragic goat …
Her. Certainly.
Soc. Then Pan, who declares and always moves (ἄει πολῶν) all, is rightly called goat-herd (αιπόλος), being the double-natured son of Hermes, smooth in his upper parts, rough and goat-like in his lower parts. And Pan, if he is the son of Hermes, is either speech or the brother of speech, and that brother resembles brother is not at all surprising. (Plato 87-89)

Plato’s Cratylus delineates the two positions from which Benjamin aims to set apart his own theory of language. On the one side, Cratylus purports that each object has received a correct denomination. On the opposite side, Hermogenes maintains that all names result
simply from conventional agreement. Ostensibly supporting Cratylus’ thesis, Socrates gives a series of etymological interpretations of the names of gods, finally concluding with an explanation of the name of the god Pan. Like the other gods, Socrates asserts, Pan is correctly named. But Pan is “two-fold,” “double-natured” — zwitterhaft (“gynander-like”) in Schleiermacher’s translation —, ambivalent. Pan is the one who designates the other, he is name and designation at once. He is “rightly” given his name, but he also designates “all,” pan. As Benjamin writes, naming and designation are “the poles between which the spark, — that the philosophy of language seeks to salvage [bergen] —, springs over,” and “that is what its [philosophy’s] history since the Cratylus teaches us” (III 141). As “Pan” harbors (bergen) the two poles in the tension of his name, he seems to point to this very “springing over” (überspringen) of the spark which Benjamin makes out as the main problematic of the philosophy of language.

The mountain forest (Bergwald) as image of language is evoked by Benjamin not only in “Pan of the Evening” but also in “The Task of the Translator.” As Benjamin writes in the preface to his translations of Baudelaire’s poems, translation is “not in the center of the language forest, but on the outside facing it,” and “without entering” calls into it, “at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation [Widerhall] of the work in the alien one” (IV.1.16; SW1 258-259). Whereas the echo called forth by translation thus follows a motion between the inside and the outside of the forest, in Benjamin’s tale of Pan, “an other passed through the forest” (VII.2.640, my emphasis). The call of translation “at the single spot” is answered, thrown back by echo (Widerhall). By contrast, what is heard within and throughout the forest by the lonely wanderer rings on not to return but to grow distant and fade out (Nachhall): “Did someone scream? ‘The forest,’ it rang on [nachhallen] shrilly in his ears” (VII.2.641). If echo is “able to give” back the reverberation of another
language in its own language, the “scream” of Pan, — “speech or the brother of speech” —, abolishes the distinction between own and other, outside and inside. “The forest” is “in his ears.” It is too close, — “shrill” —, and yet distances itself and gets lost (nachhallen). “He saw the forest … he ran into it, crashed into each trunk, — went on, deeper into the mist, where he had to be …” (VII.2.641). Pan, who according to Greek myth is in love with the nymph Echo, finds itself in the “center” of the forest, and yet is impossible to pursue and apprehend.

Just as the echo returns from the forest, the “Japanese” story might be rendered in another language by translation, echoing the own and the foreign. A reading that follows the movement Pan, on the other hand, would imply entering the language forest without return, instead getting lost between its letters and sounds. Under the sign of Pan, “all relations become other,” identities become unstable and split, inorganic things like stones gain life, and the self is lost. When looked at “multiple times,” at second glance, assailed by panic, the story “of the cliff of suicides” (vom Felsen der Selbstmörder) might then crack up and change into one about “the rock which itself is a murderer” (vom Felsen der selbst Mörder), and so on, until all sense dissolves. Haunted by Pan, the Japanese story (japanische Geschichte) may then finally turn into a ja panische, — indeed, obviously, evidently (ja) one of Pan/panic (panisch).

6.

As speech or the “brother of speech” who “resembles” (ähnlich sehn) speech, Pan eventually also leads to the problem Benjamin took up in the essay which he had reported Scholem about, and which he was about to rewrite in the middle of 1933, “Doctrine of the Similar [Ähnlichen],” his “second work on language.”

“Doctrine of the Similar” also tells a story, a history, not that of the fall, but of a loss. What is said to have been lost, or to have
disappeared, or become increasingly fragile, over the course of centuries and through historical development (but also ontogenetically with our childhood past), is the mimetic power, the gift not only of perceiving similarity but of becoming similar. From this story of decline, the “Doctrine of the Similar,” however, shifts to a story of transformation, which turns into a theory of reading. The “astrologer reads the constellation from the stars in the sky,” Benjamin points out and continues, “If, at the dawn of humanity, this reading from stars, entrails, and coincidences was reading per se, and if it provided mediating links to a newer kind of reading, as represented by runes, then one might well assume that this mimetic gift, which was earlier the basis for clairvoyance, very gradually found its way into language and writing in the course of a development over thousands of years, thus creating for itself in language and writing the most perfect archive of non-sensuous similarity” (II.1.209; SW2 697). The mimetic faculty thus has disappeared only to pour forth in another field, that of “non-sensuous similarity.” The privileged site for this “non-sensuous similarity,” however, is not spoken but written language, as Benjamin explains by alluding to the linguistic theories of the Kabbalah.

[I]t is well known that mystical language teachings do not content themselves with drawing the spoken word into the space of their considerations. They certainly also deal likewise with script. And here it is worth noting that script, perhaps even more than certain combinations of sound in language, clarifies — in the relationship of the written form [Schriftbild] of words or letters [Lettern] to the signified, or, as the case may be, to the one who gives the name — the nature of non-sensuous similarity. Thus, for instance, the letter [Buchstabe] Beth has the name of a house. It is thus non-sensuous similarity that establishes the tensions [Verspannungen] not only between
what is said and what is meant, but also between what is written and what is meant, and equally between the spoken and the written. … The most important of these tensions may, however, be the one mentioned last — that between what is written and what is said. (II.1.208, SW2 696-697, my emphasis)

The passage is not simply suggesting the importance of writing as “archive of non-sensuous similarities” by juxtaposing speech with writing, but it descends scales, from the spoken “word” to “combinations of sounds” to type or printed letters (Lettern) to the letter (der Buchstabe). The focus thus shifts from the unit of the word to the discrete element which makes it up (Dusini 68-69). Several lines on, Benjamin goes on to mention how graphology has taught to “recognize, in handwriting, images, — or, more precisely, picture puzzles [Vexierbild] — that the unconscious of the writer conceals in his writing.” However, not just writing as such, Benjamin asserts, but “the literal [buchstäbliche] text is the reservoir in which alone the picture puzzle can form itself” (II.1.208-209; SW1 697, my emphasis). While earlier, in “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin had also insisted on “literalness” (Wörtlichkeit), this had meant the word-for-word transferal of syntax, which in turn made the word into the “primary element [Urelement] of the translator” (IV.1.18; SW1 260). In “Doctrine of the Similar,” by contrast, Benjamin seems to determine the letter as the primary element of reading while referring to “mystical language teachings.” Still two years later, when provided by Scholem with a translation of the Zohar, Benjamin comments that his theory of nonsensuous similarity developed in Ibiza found “manifold illustration” in the kabbalistic work’s conception of written signs or letters (Schriftzeichen) as the “deposits of cosmic connections [Weltzusammenhänge]” (GB V 187).
Jewish mysticism as it appears in the *Zohar* did not differ so much from other mystical linguistic theories in that it presumed that human language is infiltrated by the language of God, but kabbalistic contemplation concentrated in particular on the letters and their configurations as the constituents of God’s name and the ultimate secret of divine language. According to Scholem, the kabbalistic doctrine knows two points of entry for all movement of language. The first is the *Jod*, the written form of which in Hebrew is a small apostrophe, a dot, which presents as visible symbol the origin point (*Urppunkt*) of language from which all other forms emerge, differentiate infinitely, and in a dialectical reversal return to. The other is the *Alef*, the point of indifference (*Indifferenzpunkt*) of all language, or spiritus lenis, the voiceless commencement of any vocal utterance. It is the first letter in the alphabetical sequence, the most profound letter, in the figure of which all the other letters can be inscribed, and the name of God and all language issue from it (Scholem 38-40). With these hints from Scholem, who identifies Benjamin as a “pure language mystic” (8), one might then — along the Kabbalah’s conception of the beginning of all language, and as “illustration” of Benjamin’s own conception of writing — attempt to reread the literal text of the “Japanese story,” — literally from the beginning: Jod, Alef ...

7.
A hidden image inscribed into another image, the “picture puzzle” (*Vexierbild*) is solved only by a shifting of perspectives. Switching perspectives may also reveal the concealed figures in the “Japanese story.” By shifting from reading the sequence of sentences to reading word for word, from rock (*fels*), to touch (*berühren*), to reputation (*Renommee*), the narrative of Genesis and Benjamin’s commentary may be discovered to emerge from within the interstices of the text. By reading the “combinations of sound,” the contours of Pan and Plato’s
Cratylus appear from within the word. And a reading of the letter eventually conjures up the kabbalistic theory of the unfolding of language and the cosmos. What this three-fold reading of word, sound and letter then invariably retrieves as the story’s “task to think” is the question of the “origin” of language.

Yet the “Japanese story” releases its hidden images and stories only by distorting and transfiguring them at the same time. If it evokes the biblical story of the fall, its “emblem of judgment” is not part of the creation in the Garden of Eden, but an artificial, modern-day, man-made technological product. The high-voltage wire precedes and prevents, it is “in front” or “before” (davor) the suicide, but in a sense different from God’s commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” “This commandment,” as Benjamin writes in “Critique of Violence,” “precedes the deed, just as God ‘shall prevent [davor sei]’ the deed.”

But it does not enforce obedience by fear of punishment, and once the deed is accomplished, the injunction becomes inapplicable: “No judgment of the deed can be derived from the commandment” (II.1.200; SW1 250). The high-voltage wire and the warning sign, by contrast, already proleptically contain judgement and punishment.

What is thereby preserved, protected, is not the adamic language of the name, but the re- and overnaming and the multiplication of language, or at most the foreign word which is “inserted” into the “own” in an inverse, parodistic imitation of Adam’s naming of Eve, his “own kin.” In another ironical inversion, the position of Adam and Eve as the “questioners” in paradise is taken by the “life-weary” in the “Japanese story.” Ending one’s own life was, according to Schopenhauer’s equally ironic remark, “a bad compliment” to the one who had said “everything was very good” (258). Yet just as the leap from the cliff is not a singular deed but plural (der Selbstmörder), the suicide does not just terminate an individual life, but inscribes itself into a history. It was, as Benjamin states in a note of the Arcades Project, the “quintessence
Walter Benjamin, “The Japanese story ...”

of modernity” (V.1.467; AP 366). Benjamin credits Baudelaire for discovering suicide as a heroic passion, the “only heroic act still available to the multitudes maladies from the cities” (I.2.579; SW4 46). If Nietzsche went on to fault Christianity for having prevented this heroic act (I.2.578; SW4 84), Baudelaire, in his “L’École païenne,” protests against the substitution of Greek pagan gods for the Hebraic god. He recounts how at a banquet celebrating the February Revolution a young man gives a toast to the god Pan, claiming that Pan was the revolution. Yet Pan was long dead, Baudelaire objects, and he repeats in capital letters in his text the message, which, according to Plutarch, was heard throughout the Mediterranean: “LE DIEU PAN EST MORT” (44).

If the “Japanese story” reprises the biblical story of Genesis and hides the name of a Greek god, it thus does so in a profane, modernized context in which the figure of God is evoked only through its ironical negation. And it is not only this originary figure that is placed under erasure. The “Japanese story” also invokes the story of the fall as that of the genesis of human language only by ironically inverting it. That is, if judgement and overnaming give rise to the plurality of language, then the “high-voltage wire” is not the conclusion, but the precondition of the telling of the Japanese story. The name has always already stepped outside itself, and the jump from the cliff (herabspringen) is not the beginning of the story. The wire must precede the suicide it pretends to prevent. If the leap (Sprung) is therefore origin (Ur-sprung), then only in the particular sense Benjamin gives it: not a genesis or progressive becoming, “no becoming of that which has come into being, but rather that which arises out of becoming and passing away” (I.1.226; OGT 24). For Benjamin, the origin does not take place at the beginning, it stands “in the flow of becoming as a whirlpool and rips the material of genesis into its rhythmics.” And this “rhythm” is only accessible to a “dual insight,” an insight that is also needed in order to
grasp the “picture puzzle.” Just as the origin is not the progress of the
one or the decay of the other but the springing forth in the side by side
of both (Jacobs 8), the picture puzzle is not one picture or the other, but
one contained in another. As one image springs forth from the other,
the story of the fall springs forth from the “Japanese story.” And like
the picture puzzle which is decided by the instant of switching
perspectives, the reading and solving of the Denkaufgabe is temporal,
contingent on time, in the same way that there are no “conclusive”
solutions for the translation but only “temporal and provisional” or
“timely” ones (IV.1.14/92; SW1 257/449).

In “Doctrine of the Similar,” Benjamin replaces the explication
of the creation narrative of Genesis from “On Language as Such and
the Language of Man” with a kind of anthropological tale of
phylogenetic and ontogenetic transformation.18 This leads him to the
reading of stars, to runes, to the schoolboy’s ABC book, and to the
Kabbalah. Unlike “The Task of the Translator” which focused on the
literal (wörtlich) rendering of the syntax, and the word as “primary
element” of translation, “Doctrine of the Similar” thereby arrives at the
literal (bucbstäbliche) text as reservoir of the “picture puzzle.” In his
commentary to “The Task of the Translator,” which is also a
commentary on the essay’s English translation, Paul de Man has
explicated that “when the translator follows the syntax, when he writes
literally, wörtlich, … [t]he problem is best compared to the relationship
between the letter and the word.” According to de Man, the relationship
between word and sentence is like the relationship between letter and
word; they are entirely independent from each other: “the letter is
without meaning in relation to the word, it is asémos, it is without
meaning.” When spelling a word, the letters “come together in the
word, but in each of the letters the word is not present” (de Man 41).
By contrast, the English translation of “Doctrine of the Similar”
suggests a more intimate relation when it renders Benjamin’s example

for the relationships or “tensions” (Verspannungen) of written form, name, and thing as: “Thus, for instance the letter beth [in Hebrew] is the root for the word meaning ‘house’” (SW2 696). Paradoxically, the translation arrives at identifying the letter as the “root for the word” only by not translating literally, wörtlich, thereby inverting the original sentence. What Benjamin’s wording seems to imply is neither a complete disjunction of letter and word nor a genesis or emanation of meaning out of the letter. While Beth in Hebrew is the second letter of the alphabet and the noun used to mean “house,” in yet another ironical gesture of crossing out any predictable hierarchy or primacy of letter, signified, or name, Benjamin simply writes: “Thus, the letter Beth has the name of a house” (II.1.209).

The “spark,” which Benjamin’s philosophy of language aims to recover, thus does not recoil into the letter but momentously springs forth, from one pole to the other, within the “tensions” (Verspannungen) of letter, word, and thing. And just as in the handwritten note the writing suspends and retracts the word when it halts in the letter combination “Leitung,” not to complete it into Leitungsdraht, — the word for “transmitting” or “conducting wire” —, but to supplant it by Hochspannungsdraht, “high-tension wire,” Benjamin’s fragmentary texts seem to call not for a linear, progressive reading that intends to receive what has been “transmitted,” but for a reading enervated by the “tensions” of text, word, and letter, a reading that in an instant springs off and displaces the writing to recover “what never was written.” Once more following Benjamin, one could then formulate another, concluding, “provisional” solution to the “task” of the “Japanese story”: Thus, the letter Jod, primal point from which the movement of language arises, and the letter Alef, from which the name of God and all letters emerge, and the god PAN, speech or the brother of speech who designates all, are renamed, they have a new name, the name of a country, the Renommee der Gegend, — J A PAN.
Notes

1. References to Walter Benjamin’s collected works in German (Gesammelte Schriften) in the text are indicated by volume, part, and page number. Page numbers for English translations, when available, follow. The following abbreviations are used in citing the translations: SW (Selected Writings), AP (The Arcades Project), and OGT (Origin of the German Trauerspiel). The translations are modified sometimes slightly, in some cases substantially. Occasionally, I have borrowed phrases from translations by Carol Jacobs in The Language of Walter Benjamin. Translations from fragments of vol.7 of the Gesammelte Schriften are my own. References to Benjamin’s letters and correspondence are marked by the abbreviation GB and volume number (Gesammelte Briefe), or the short reference CA/B (Gretel Adorno and Walter Benjamin, Correspondence).

2. As Antoine Berman contends, Benjamin’s texts are in a paradoxical state of incompleteness that does not exclude a certain state of completeness; they are fragmentary precisely because each text is rounded and finished (Berman 25). They have a “form, which precisely as it is frail and incomplete,” “retains the power of the universal” (Adorno, Noten zur Literatur 570).

3. Sigrid Weigel finds that Anglo-American translations tend to obliterate Benjamin’s linguistic operations between metaphor and concept, not because they are prone to mistranslation as such but because they practice translation as clôture, they take recourse to a translation strategy that avoids commentary in favor of translatory “decisions,” assimilating the foreignness of the translation to produce a transparent “idiomatic” text that appears to be written in the native language (Weigel 51-56, esp. 52). For Benjamin himself, commentary and translation are interrelated as they are only different ways of referring to one and the same phenomenon: “On
the tree of the sacred text, both are just the eternally rushing leaves,
on the tree of the profane the timely falling fruits” (IV.1.92; SW1 449).

4. Benjamin had already spent several months in Ibiza the year before
and, on his way back to Berlin, had contemplated suicide when
stopping at a hotel in Nice. For a detailed account of the circum-
stances of his stays on the island and the historical background see
Valero.

5. “Now the time has come that I can engage with a comparison of
the two works on language [Spracharbeiten],” Benjamin writes in
the letter to Scholem of May 31, 1933 (GB IV 223). See also his
letters of May 23, and June 16 and 29 (GB IV 214, 236, 253).
Scholem had provided a copy of “On Language as Such …” by the
end of June. See the letter to Gretel Karplus, ca. June 25, 1933 (GB
IV 248).

6. In the letter to Gretel Adorno which Jacques Derrida has
commented on, Benjamin recounts in French (Latin script) a dream
about the letter “d” (German script). The elongated shape of the
German letter is significant insofar as in the dream Benjamin
discovers a sail in the “upper parts” of the letter, “whose slender
lengths concealed an intense aspiration toward spirituality” (GB VI
342; CA/B 273). Benjamin also wrote one script next to the other
when scribbling under the influence of mescaline. See the
reproductions of his “drawings” made during his drug experiment
(VI 610-612).

7. Walter Benjamin, manuscript page Ms 620 (verso) from “crime
novel” [envelope with materials for a planned novel] (ca.1933),
AdK, Berlin, Walter Benjamin Archiv, WBA 1143; transcribed and
published in VII.2 846. The seven sheets of paper on which
Benjamin recorded “scenes, motives, tricks” (GB IV 207) were
contained in an envelope with the label “crime novel.” Benjamin
assisted the novelist Wilhelm Speyer in composing a detective play in 1932 and planned a detective novel together with Bertolt Brecht around 1933, but the note in question here relates to neither of these projects.

8. The six entries in the list are: “The stranger’s garden” (*Der Garten des Fremden*) which can be traced to a riddle based on “Russel’s paradox” (VII.1.302-303), “prairie fire” (*Steppenbrand*), “the bookworm” (*Der Bücherwurm*) — another riddle (VII.1.305-306) —, “the spot-laughters” (*Die Flecklacher*) which might refer to one of the hashish protocols (see VI.586), “the four colors problem” (*Das Vierfarbenproblem*) — a known geometrical problem unsolved at Benjamin’s time —, and “Don Carlos’ letter” (*Der Brief des Don Carlos*) — a reference to Schiller’s drama.

9. Direct translation from the German. A domesticating translation might try to break up the hypotactic sentence structure: “The Japanese story about the suicide cliff. Those who were tired of living jumped off the cliff. A power line was strung in front of it. This was done to protect the reputation of the region where the cliff was situated. A warning sign said: ‘Do not touch – Risk of death.”

10. It is also “like a chemist” that the commentator, according to Benjamin, faces these elements (I.1.126; SW1 298).

11. *Gegend* (from *gegen*=against) is the verbatim translation of the Latin *contrata* (from *contra*), which is at the root of the French *contrée*, and the English word “country.”

12. Benjamin read the Bible in Luther’s translation and mentions him in “The Task of the Translator.” In Ibiza, between April and October 1933, Benjamin also read French historian Lucien Febvre’s work on Martin Luther (see VII.1.467).

13. In the short essay “On the Use of Foreign Words,” dating from 1934 and clearly influenced by Benjamin, Adorno writes that every insertion of a foreign term “celebrates once more in a profane way
the true prehistorical naming” (Noten zur Literatur 643). Adorno also alludes to Benjamin’s figure of the “silver rib,” albeit without referring it back to God’s creation of Eve (645).

14. Likewise, Adorno asserts that Benjamin insisted on “observing all objects so closely that they became foreign and as such foreign things gave away their secret” (Vermischte Schriften 169).

15. The English translation condenses the original construction: “Naming and designating are the poles between which the philosophy of language seeks to strike a spark” (SW4 567). Conveying that — instead of “salvaging” — the philosophy of language is (actively) producing the spark as in an experimental set-up, the translation not only omits the disparate meanings of the word bergen (to rescue, to recover, to secure, to harbor, to conceal), and thus cancels out the paradox of how to “shelter” a spark, — a paradox that resonates with the image of the theory of language’s “floating over the abyss” (II.1.141; SW1 63). It also passes over the tension between the words bergen and trachten (to seek, to aspire, to endeavor). The German term bergen/Bergung not merely means “shelter” or “rescue,” but also the salvaging of what remains after an accident or a catastrophe. Trachten relates to trächtig (to retain the seed, to be pregnant, conceiving) and tragen (to carry). While the one term (bergen) thus relates to a movement to the inside (bringing into safety) after an event that arrives from elsewhere, the other (trachten) indicates an event brought about from the inside and carried to the outside, a sheltering that awaits the moment in which what is sheltered is realized (“carried out,” given birth to). “Zu bergen trachten” itself thus retains the tension of the two poles which is resolved only in the moment of the “spark.” What is decisive for Benjamin’s “philosophy of language” is the same as for translation which watches over “the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (IV.1.13; SW1
256). It is not the repeatable “striking” of the spark, but the “timeliness” (*kairos*) of its “springing over.”

16. While the subjunctive mode and the word order seem to indicate indirect speech, the inverted commas in Benjamin’s text mark “*davor sei*” as a quotation of the phrase “*Da sei Gott vor!*” (literally “God be in front of/before it”). The subjunctive thus expresses the wish that God may prevent a *future* event (“God forbid”). That is, it does not imply uncertainty about God’s “preventing” (in the present) but rather indicates the preventing’s being premised on the consonance of God’s commandment and the wish or call for God, a consonance which prevents because it precedes, “comes before” (*pre-venire*) mythic law and the intervention of judgment and the mythic violence of punishment. This is lost in the English translation (SW1 250), as it renders the German subjunctive of “*sei*” in the past form and places only “preventing” in quotation marks (“was ‘preventing’”), both of which seems to simply underline the unreality of God’s “preventing” in the present.

17. One might think that this “demonic” or “mythic” moment of the “Japanese story” also comprises the very historical moment of its notation in 1933. Walter Benjamin’s younger brother, the paediatrician and Communist Georg Benjamin, was arrested for the first time in April 1933, and a second time in 1936. He died shortly after being transferred to the Mauthausen concentration camp in 1942. The letter his wife received from the SS indicated as “cause of death: suicide by touching the power line” (Hilde Benjamin 290).

18. In a letter of June 29, 1933 (GB IV 253), Benjamin informs Scholem that the new theoretical reflections were conceived to be an “annex” to the earlier work on language, yet not to its
“commentarial part,” that is, not to his interpretation of the Genesis chapters.

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