

Madeleine Kasten, Rico Sneller, Gerard Visser (eds.)
Benjamin's Figures: Dialogues on the Vocation of the Humanities

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POTSDAM *
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Walter Benjamin at the age of five,
dressed up as a Prussian hussar (1897).
Photograph courtesy of the Akademie der Künste,
Berlin, Walter Benjamin Archiv

Contents

Preface <i>Madeleine Kasten</i>	xi
List of Abbreviations	xxii
DIALECTICS AT A STANDSTILL: BENJAMIN'S 'DENKBILDER'	
Benjamin's Thought-Images in <i>Einbahnstraße</i> <i>Gustan Asselbergs</i>	1
Sichtlich sich verbergend: Die Autor-Figur des <i>Passagen-Werkes</i> <i>Wolfram Malte Fues</i>	15
LIMINAL FIGURES: CHILD AND <i>FLÂNEUR</i>	
The Child at the Threshold: Walter Benjamin's <i>Berliner Kindheit um 1900</i> <i>Corina Stan</i>	33
The <i>Flâneur</i> and Socio-Economic Critique <i>Nassima Sabraoui</i>	51
UNSIGHTLY FIGURES	
Walter Benjamin's Figures of De-Figuration: The Barbarian, the Destructive Character, and the Monster <i>Sami R. Khatib</i>	71
	vii

ANGELS AND HISTORIANS

Benjamin's Angel in Light of Jewish Mysticism
Rico Sneller 95

'To Make the Continuum of History Explode':
On the Concept of Time in Walter Benjamin's
On the Concept of History and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*
Anna F. Köberich 121

Die Angel der kleinen Pforte:
Walter Benjamins Konzept des Eingedenkens
und seine Bedeutung für die *humanities*
Stefano Marchesoni 137

ALLEGORY AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Closing Time:
Benjamin, Temporality, and the Problem of Political Organization
Bennett Carpenter 161

Of Fish and Men:
Benjamin's Allegorist and the Meaning of Life
Madeleine Kasten 181

Walter Benjamin on Charlie Chaplin:
The *Rehabilitation* of the Allegorical in Modernity
Daniel Mourenza 193

THE NARRATOR AND THE POLITICS OF SENSES

"Drawing on an Unlikely Source":
The "Erzähler", the Islamic Revival,
and Benjamin's Philosophy of Language
Ton Groeneweg 215

Contents

TRANSLATION BETWEEN FOREIGNNESS AND KINSHIP

Bleakness in the Age of Google:
Walter Benjamin and the Possibility of Redemptive Translation
Orr Scharf 237

Walter Benjamin's Translator/Critic
as a Model for Transcultural Thought and Practice
Gisela Brinker-Gabler 259

THE TASK OF THE CRITIC

Lektüre als Opfer:
Der Kritiker in "Wider ein Meisterwerk" und dem Trauerspielbuch
Anna Wołkowitz 271

THE RIGHTEOUS AS MEDIATOR
OF LINGUISTIC EXPERIENCE

"Im Anfang war das Wort":
Von Adam, zwei Bäumen und dem Gerechten
Gerard Visser 287

About the Authors 305

Indices 309

Preface

Madeleine Kasten

This volume finds its origin in a conference titled *Benjamin's Figures: Dialogues on the Vocation of the Humanities* which took place at Leiden University, Netherlands, in August 2013. In the meantime, the theme that inspired the conference – the more or less permanent crisis in the humanities, reinforced by the economic crisis that hit the world in 2008 – has in no way lost its urgency. The opposite is true: far from having ended with the financial crisis, whose effects are still noticeable everywhere, the need for the humanities to defend their existence appears only to have increased. Two examples, one from the US and one from the Netherlands, will suffice to illustrate this point.

In March 2017, US President Donald Trump presented his first federal budget plan, in which he proposed to end both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. It was the first time since the creation of the endowments in 1965 that a US president demanded their termination, and although the House later voted for a continuation of federal support at a slightly decreased level the proposal itself is a sign on the wall. A year before, Dutch conservative senator Pieter Duisenberg had already gained wide support for his view that academic study programmes in the Netherlands offering no job guarantees (so-called *pretstudies* – literally ‘fun studies’, understood to include art, most of the humanities, and a considerable part of the social sciences) should be axed. Meanwhile Duisenberg has been appointed chair of the Co-operating Dutch Universities (VSNU), where he took up his duties on October 1, 2017. One of his stated aims is to create more incentives for universities to market their study programmes, and to link the allocation of budgets for tuition to performance agreements based on quantitative indicators between the government and ‘internal stakeholders’ (students and university staff) as well

as trade and industry. In addition, the allocation of research budgets is to be increasingly geared towards ‘social relevance’.

So the question remains: how can the humanities justify their existence in an academic environment facing ubiquitous cutbacks – an environment where, as Stanley Fish has argued, productivity, efficiency and consumer satisfaction appear to be the only relevant criteria anyway? Even if eloquent spokespersons such as Fish and Martha Nussbaum are perhaps overstating the case it appears that the humanities, more than ever, need to reconsider their specific role for our times. For on the one hand, the institutional call for more efficiency is seen to conflict with the humanities’ insistence on academic freedom and interdisciplinary research as essential to the development of a critical perspective on the operations of culture as a whole. On the other hand, the notions of freedom and interdisciplinarity must themselves be constantly rethought to prevent the legacy of ‘the cultural turn’ from being reduced to an empty cliché.

At Leiden University, we chose to address this need for reflection on the vocation of the humanities by organizing an international conference devoted to the thought of philosopher of culture Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). In doing so, our aim was to consolidate an interdisciplinary initiative started in 2010, when we marked the recent fusion between our former faculties of arts, philosophy and religious studies with a conference on the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

A conspicuous feature of Benjamin’s writing is its lack of any formal pretence to system building. In fact the bulk of his oeuvre is made up of short essays and notes on a wide range of seemingly disparate cultural phenomena, where philological commentary and criticism go hand in hand. The reason for this absence of closure and the frequent shifts in focus must not be sought in any incidental default. Instead, they reflect Benjamin’s experience of his own age as requiring a direct, polemical style and approach antithetical to incorporation into a fixed order.

If fragmentariness imposes itself as a necessary formal characteristic of Benjamin’s writing, his project is nevertheless held together by a single underlying ambition: to study cultural signs as the ideal expression of the religious, metaphysical, political, and economic tendencies of a specific historical period. True to the semantic potential of Greek *aisthesis*, he promotes aesthetics to the status of an all-encompassing, interdisciplinary theory of experience. For the timeless idea, says Benjamin, is to be captured only in the process of its historical becoming – that is, at its origin, the

vanishing point where it enters, and dissolves into, the material as the force determining its necessary form in history. The apprehension of this origin thus depends on a dual intuition where the singular reveals itself as part of a structure, a *constellation* that transcends the realm of the material yet remains faithful to each of its particulars: ideas stand to objects as constellations stand to stars (*GS* I.1, 214).

In his analyses of cultural phenomena and the constellations to which they belong Benjamin shows himself unusually aware of the role of the philosopher/critic. Characteristically, this agent takes on different shapes according to varying contexts: the angel of history, the narrator, the *flâneur*, the child, the dwarf, the collector – to name just some central *personas*. Indeed Benjamin's use of multiple, at times carefully orchestrated voices in his texts radicalizes the notion of interdisciplinarity in ways which, we feel, provides a vital source of inspiration for the humanities in our times.

For our conference, then, we solicited papers reflecting on the socio-critical potential of the humanities through one or more of these Benjaminian figures, and our call was rewarded by a rich response. For three days we experienced the peculiar energy generated by non-stop discussion, the atmosphere being enhanced by the material presence of visual art inspired by Benjamin, a musical performance, and the conference-related art festival *Cultuur?Barbaar!* organized by our indefatigable former students Looi van Kessel and Gerlov van Engelenhoven.

The essays contained in the present volume reflect this energy. Twelve of them are written in English, four in German. As the conference itself was bilingual and this bilingualism was experienced by many attendants as a blessing, especially in view of the long-standing divide between German and Anglo-American Benjamin studies, we have decided to publish the essays in their original languages.

The first section, “Dialectics at a Standstill: Benjamin's ‘*Denkbilder*’”, opens with Gustan Asselbergs's attempt to assess the philosophical nature of the aphorisms or *Denkbilder*, sixty in all, which Benjamin collected in his volume *One-way Street*. The author begins by justifying the use of the term *Denkbilder* itself and develops his analysis in three steps. In the first part of his argument he focuses on Benjamin's notion of the idea set forth in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. The idea cannot be rationally grasped; it can only reveal itself – hence the problem of representation or *Darstellung*. The prose form of the thought

image, a “*kontemplative Darstellung*” which forces the reader to pause, was designed to meet this difficulty. However, *One-way Street* is not just about the idea of an ordinary street. In his thought-images, of which Asselbergs discusses examples in his Part II, Benjamin confronts the shock experience of modern city life, opening up an ‘image-space’ which at the same time offers a free playground for the spectator. Asselbergs examines the textual properties responsible for this effect and concludes: “By this means a space is opened that distinguishes itself from the mercantile gaze of shock-reality, in favor of the interplay between distance and nearness; a dimension that goes beyond the experience of shock.” In the third and last part he analyzes the critical function of the thought-image through the figure of the *flâneur*.

Wolfram Malte Fues, in his contribution, draws attention to some well-known observations from the *Arcades Project*, for instance, “*In dem Gebieten, mit denen wir es zu tun haben, gibt es Erkenntnis nur blitzhaft. Der Text ist der langnachrollende Donner*”; “*Bild ist Dialektik im Stillstand*”; “*Das Ewige ist eher eine Rüsche am Kleid als eine Idee*”. These statements are uttered by an author-subject. But what kind of a subject is speaking here, and what is the status of the comments themselves? They are apodictic judgements claiming that something is necessarily the case without determining this ‘something’ further. Determination should result from the images themselves; here, however, metaphor assumes the nature of *catachresis*, a word meant to fill a semantic gap, and images such as “*Blitz*”, “*Donner*”, “*Rusche am Kleid*”, turn out to stand for something that is hardly clarified through examination. The author finds an answer to the question concerning the nature of the author-subject in the following passage from Benjamin: “*An einem Sommernachmittag ruhend einem Gebirgszug am Horizont oder einem Zweig folgen, der seinen Schatten auf den Ruhenden wirft – das heißt die Aura dieser Berge, dieser Zweige atmen*”. In Fues’s analysis of the text a complex play of closeness and distance unfolds itself which leads him to conclude that “*Das Autor-Subjekt des Passagen-Werks is dasjenige, das an einem Sommertag die Konfiguration des Auratischen ruhend auf sich werken läßt, um die in ihm aufgehobenen Konstellationen atmend freizusetzen*”. In his conclusion he locates this attitude, this fixed stare of quiet attentiveness which enables manifold reflection, in Benjamin’s *Denkbild* “The Tree and Speech”, anchoring it retrospectively in the essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”.

The first paper in the second section, “Liminal Figures: Child and *Flâneur*”, is by Corina Stan and contains an analysis of the *Denkbilder* in

Preface

Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. Stan begins by characterizing this work as "the subjective counterpart to Benjamin's *Arcades* project". Both texts represent an in-between space or liminal zone, while the title of the first "suggests the image of the child playing at the threshold between centuries". *Berlin Childhood* can be dramatically characterized as "a farewell bid to a Berlin where all places were like so many dwellings, at a moment when the exiled writer had no proper abode". Stan explains the nature of the *Denkbilder* in the book by means of a fragment from the *Passagen-Werk* where Benjamin draws a distinction between his dialectic images and phenomenological essences. According to Stan, Benjamin's aim in these texts was to create a careful balance between two different notions, that of the allegorical, which imposes meaning on what is lost, and that of the aura, where meaning or significance comes from the person or object itself. "So how [one may ask] is it possible for the Berlin texts to occupy a threshold position between two opposite perceptions, one that emphasizes utopian wholeness, the other that has precariousness at its core?" Stan relates this liminal zone temporally to Benjamin's notions of waking up and the "*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*", and spatially to the phenomenon of *proxemics*, a term coined by cultural anthropologist Edward Hall, here used to denote the affective realm of desire in which the child interacts with the objects surrounding it. Stan concludes with a reflection on the possible significance of Benjamin's liminal balancing act for the humanities, drawing on one particular example of Benjamin's proxemics: little Walter's habit of always lagging half a step behind his mother, as this would give him the idea of being smarter than he really was ...

Nassima Sahraoui, in her contribution, undertakes to show "how a great number of Benjamin's motifs are comprised in his comprehensive analysis of one prominent figure in his oeuvre: the *flâneur*". Her starting point is the "Maxim of the *flâneur*", which Benjamin explains through the following observation by Daniel Halévy: "In our standardized and uniform world, it is right here, deep below the surface [*en profondeur*], that we must walk. Estrangement [*dépaysement*] and surprise, the most thrilling exotism, are all close by". What follows is an analysis of the cityscape that Paris is to the *flâneur*, which Sahraoui develops first through Benjamin's writings on the medium of the panorama, then through his reading of the experience of modern space as a "colportage phenomenon" where everything is perceived simultaneously. The *flâneur* finds himself on the threshold between "two spatial contexts: on the one hand he posits himself in a necessary and almost

existential relation to the marketplace, while on the other hand instantaneously abstaining from social reality”. Finally, Sahraoui relates this doubleness to Benjamin’s critique of what he called the “dialectic of intoxication”.

Sami R. Khatib’s paper makes up the third section, “Unsightly Figures”. In his introduction, Khatib claims that the figures in Benjamin’s work are not “the mere derivative illustrations of concepts”, but rather “the figurative medium of the elliptical constellations of his thought”. The author focuses on three of these figures, whose instability, as “figures of figuration and de-figuration”, he reads in accordance with Benjamin’s understanding of the dialectic image: as disruptive figures whose force at first seems to be purely destructive, but whose true function is to clear a space for what is yet to come. In reality, the barbarian, the destructive character, and the monster (Karl Kraus’s *Un-Mensch*) are “the figurative harbingers of a new post-humanist ‘real humanism’”.

Section Four, “Angels and Historians”, opens with Rico Sneller’s essay, whose aim is to elucidate Benjamin’s angel figure through the tradition of Jewish mysticism. The figure of the angel plays an important part both in Benjamin’s work and his life. Most famous among its manifestations is probably the angel of history in *On the Concept of History*; this angel, which constitutes a direct reference to the biblical angel protecting paradise against man’s return to it, may be read as an expression of metaphysical despair *vis à vis* the catastrophes of historical ‘progress’. But there are many more angels to be found in Benjamin’s work, for instance in his autobiographical text “Agesilaus Santander”, and also in his essays on Karl Kraus and Baudelaire. Well known are his admiration of Paul Klee’s angel paintings, his purchase of one of them, and his failed initiative to start a journal titled *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin’s friend Gershom Scholem recalls the frequent conversations he had with Benjamin on the subject of angels, both in literature and in the Jewish tradition. Sneller approaches Benjamin’s angel figure from the perspective of kabbalistic angelology. Rather than proving that Benjamin was actually influenced by this tradition his purpose is to look for convergences that may shed a new light on the role of the angel figure in Benjamin’s oeuvre.

Anna F. Köberich’s paper centres on two questions: “How is one to understand the *Jetztzeit*? And what does this notion mean for us today?” In her explanation of Benjamin’s understanding of history as developed in *On the Concept of History*, the author zooms in on two figures: the historical

materialist, and the angel from the ninth thesis. Essential to the former's relationship to the past is the moment of standstill or *Stillstellung*. It is precisely this moment that is inhabited by the angel as it takes "an empathetic stance towards the oppressed of the past". Köberich continues with an analysis of David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas*, drawing attention to the ingenious way in which time is fragmented here through Benjamin's conceptions of time, history, and *Stillstellung*. Her conclusion: "The past triggers an *impulse for agency* (to act in the now) and the future is not perceived as a goal or endpoint, but as an ongoing *possibility* in the present". Scholars are no more able to bring the dead back to life than the angel; yet "the work of the humanities can, in a caring attitude, look backwards and ensure that the stories of the past are being read and told – every time anew 'against the grain' of conformity and progress at all costs".

In Stefano Marchesoni's essay, the figure of the historian or the historical materialist as discussed in Benjamin's *On the Conception of History* once more takes centre stage. Characteristically, Benjamin cares less about the identity of this historian than about his approach, which distinguishes itself first and foremost by its being grounded in a peculiar and multi-faceted *experience*. This experience, in turn, can be related to the idea of remembrance (*Eingedenken*) which Benjamin briefly outlines in the last part of his text. For Marchesoni, far from being an unambiguous concept, remembrance is a complex figure of thought in which multiple insights and drafts converge, and which he undertakes to elaborate in the first part of his essay. In the second part, this analysis then enables him to address the urgent question regarding the value of Benjamin's thought-figure for the humanities today. The author argues that Michel Foucault's archaeology of the humanities in *The Order of Things* has an important, hitherto underrated contribution to offer towards the epistemological clarification of Benjamin's method that is of special relevance for the *Arcades Project*.

Section Five, "Allegory and the Politics of Representation", opens with a paper by Bennett Carpenter in which he raises the question how one can offer political resistance to capitalism today. For his answer, the author focuses on Benjamin's concept of homogeneous, empty time (*On the Concept of History*). Drawing on recent studies by others, he traces the historical relationship between this concept of time and the rise of manufactural and industrial labour. To his four aspects of the worker's estrangement (i.e., from his product, from himself, from the essence of his being-human, and finally from his fellow humans), young Marx could have

added a fifth: estrangement from time. What ‘time of politics’ do we need to fight this particular form of estrangement? According to Carpenter, the format of the political party remains necessary. Here, Novalis’s and Benjamin’s understanding of allegory as the representation of the unrepresentable through “the very failure of representation” presents itself as a useful analogy for the party to avoid the pitfalls of the past. For “such a reconceptualization shifts the party from symbol to allegory, from the vessel of truth to its conduit, opening up the problem of political organization as an autopoietic act of continual self-invention”.

Madeleine Kasten’s contribution is likewise devoted to the contemporary significance of Benjamin’s critique of allegory for the humanities, as an antidote against the progressive commodification of knowledge but also against certain debilitating effects of postmodernism within the humanities themselves. In her introduction, the author contrasts the negative moral of Monty Python’s comedy film *The Meaning of Life*, i.e., that the meaning of life resists objectification, to the current pressure on universities to convert knowledge, their stock-in-trade, into quantifiable business targets. This is followed by a discussion first of Benjamin’s distinction between knowledge and truth as elaborated in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, then of his historical-philosophical positioning of the German baroque *Trauerspiel*, and finally of his reflexion on allegory and the figure of the allegorist. One lesson scholars may learn from the latter is that notwithstanding the demands of the market it is crucial always to maintain a critical reserve towards one’s object of study. At the same time the allegorist’s belief that there *is* meaning, however elusive, also serves as a call never to betray one’s hopes for a better world “by promoting difference to the status of either a given, or an end in itself”.

The last paper in this section is by Daniel Mourenza, whose aim is to show “that Benjamin perceived in contemporary cultural figures such as Kafka, Brecht and Chaplin an allegorical intention to express the fragmentation of modern human beings through different media such as literature, theatre and film”. The author demonstrates the influence of Charlie Chaplin on Brecht and his epic theatre as well as on Benjamin’s reading of Kafka. He shows how, for Benjamin, the medium of cinema is connected to his understanding of the allegorical. For “it can be argued that film, by exploding reality with ‘the dynamite of its fractions of a second’ and turning it into ruins, can to some extent decipher its meaning, bestow

meaning on a reality which was hitherto incomprehensible". What unites Chaplin, Kafka and Brecht is their common interest in *Gestus*, defined by Brecht's assistant director Carl Weber "as the total process, the 'ensemble' of all physical behavior the actor displays when showing as a 'character' on stage by way of his/her social interactions". Benjamin analyzes the concept of *Gestus* further, characterizing it as dialectics at a standstill. With regard to Chaplin he notes that "each single movement he makes is composed of a succession of staccato bits of movement". And: "*Zerstücklung bei Chaplin. Er legt sich selbst allegorisch aus*". Invoking Chaplin's film *Modern Times*, which Benjamin probably never saw, Mourenza concludes that "these jerky movements [made by Chaplin] can be defined as the *Gestus* of a worker making readable his bodily and mental alienation in a factory".

In the sixth section, "The Narrator and the Politics of Senses", Ton Groeneweg draws attention to an extraordinary example of the inspirational force of Benjamin's work: cultural anthropologist Charles Hirschkind's appeal, in his study *The Ethical Soundscape*, to Benjamin's essay "The Narrator". In the course of his research into the ways in which the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt spread its religious message, especially through sermons recorded on tapes which could be listened to at work or on the road, Hirschkind was struck by the sensory and physical nature of this mode of reception. Groeneweg begins by relating this case to Benjamin's insights in "The Narrator", after which he retraces his steps and elaborates his argument with the help of Benjamin's essays on language. In particular, he focuses on "On the Mimetic Faculty" and Benjamin's claim that "it is not through the cognitive act of interpretation that man relates to the non-sensuous similarities, it is by becoming *similar*". In his conclusion, Groeneweg highlights the affinity between Benjamin's conception of language and the religious practice studied by Hirschkind: in both cases, justice is done to "the embodied dimension of language" or, in Hirschkind's words, a "politics of the senses".

The first contribution in Section Seven, "Translation between Foreignness and Kinship", is by Orr Scharf, who condemns the approach underlying Google's translation tool as testifying to "a perfunctory conception of language". Scharf confronts this approach with the redemptive notion of translation in Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator". In doing so, he purposely concentrates on the often neglected figure of the *translator* – that is, on Benjamin's own translations. Although Benjamin himself persistently downplayed his individual role as a translator, Scharf does not

consider this modesty justified or desirable. After all, Benjamin's selection of the works he chose to translate was none but his own. The author elaborates the significance of this selection through a comparison between Benjamin as translator of Baudelaire and Proust, and Franz Rosenzweig as translator of Judah Halevi and (in cooperation with Martin Buber) the biblical Book of Genesis. In his discussion of Benjamin's translation essay Scharf aptly summarizes its paradoxical essence as follows: "Throughout the essay, Benjamin stresses that translation demonstrates the kinship of languages and their shared origin from the *reine Sprache*, while nevertheless warning translators that they should not strive to produce texts that are faithful to the original".

Where the focus in Scharf's paper lies on Benjamin's own translations, Gisela Brinker-Gabler's essay charts the relevance of Benjamin's "Task of the Translator" for postcolonial studies. More specifically, the author argues that Benjamin's translator/critic "offers a complex and flexible site for scholars in language and literature" to reflect on postcolonialism, cultural difference, heterogenization, and social change. Thus she notes how Homi Bhabha enlists Benjamin's translation theory "as a means of thinking creatively through the concept of nation and cultural difference". Other examples of scholars who have taken inspiration from Benjamin's translation essay include Tejasvini Niranjana and Joshua Price. The latter, writing about hybrid languages, elaborates on Benjamin's conception of all languages as fragments of the *reine Sprache* to develop a new understanding of multilinguality. Here, the notion of the individual language as a necessarily incomplete fragment works to undermine the colonizing tendency to create dichotomies between self and other, and to affirm difference instead.

In Section Eight, "The Task of the Critic", Anna Wołkowicz analyzes the "redeeming paradoxes" which together determine the mission of Benjamin's critic. For Benjamin, works of art – including poems, composed as they are in imperfect human language – belong inevitably to the realm of fallen creation. The critic's task is to recognize and represent the work's ideal content; a task that not only requires its "mortification", but that also compels him to sacrifice the false 'now' of its historical emergence by assigning it to the ideal origin that shaped it. In arguing this point, Wołkowicz traces the metaphor of sacrifice through Benjamin's oeuvre, interweaving his critical review of Max Kommerell's 'contemplative' criticism (*Schau*) with, among other texts, the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

Preface

In the ninth and last section, “The Righteous as Mediator of Linguistic Experience”, Gerard Visser turns the spotlight on two figures which, in Benjamin’s work, represent man as such, or the essence of being-human: Adam and the righteous one. He relates these human figures to two non-human ones, i.e., the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil from Genesis. Visser’s thesis is that Benjamin’s theology of language developed in his early essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” remains fundamental to all of his work. The tree of knowledge represents the instrumental view of language, the tree of life the experience of the linguistic kinship of the universe entrusted to Adam in the Garden of Eden. The author shows the affinity between Benjamin’s theology of language and the thought of the German mystic Meister Eckhart, for whom, as for John the Evangelist, the word is the beginning of everything, and who equally considers the good to be an act of communication. Just as Eckhart’s righteous one commits himself to this fundamental truth, so does Benjamin’s righteous one, the story-teller, act as a medium for the flow of communication, moving up and down the ladder of experience, from the bottom rung to the top. Visser ends by testing his argument against an interpretation of the text “To the Public: Please Protect and Preserve These New Plantings” from *One Way Street*, pointing out the relationship between its three aphorisms that reveals itself when they are read in the light of Benjamin’s exegesis of the tree of life.

This introduction would not be complete without the acknowledgement of some ‘figures’ who supported our project at various stages of its materialization. First of all, thanks are due to two colleagues of Leiden University, Germanist Jef Jacobs and historical theorist Herman Paul, who generously gave their time and thought to the organization of our conference. We are also indebted to Gustan Asselbergs, one of the contributors to this volume, who kindly took it upon himself to track down some obscure references in our university library. Finally, our special thanks go to Cornelis van Tilburg, our indomitable colleague of the Leiden Classics department, for the good grace with which he performed the task of forging one manuscript – including a uniform referencing system – out of sixteen *Bruchstücke* so univocal yet completely singular.

List of Abbreviations

- GB*, *vol.*, *page*: Benjamin, W. (1995ff.): *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. C. Gödde & H. Lonitz, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- GS*, *vol.*, *page*: Benjamin, W. (1972ff.): *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. H. Schweppenhäuser & R. Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
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