

# Walter Benjamin, Franz Borkenau, and the Story of the Alienated Individual

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**Abstract:** In this article I claim that Walter Benjamin's work is important for thinking our way toward revolutionary politics from a linguistic-cultural perspective. I do so by bringing Franz Borkenau's work on what he calls the 'I-form' of speech into contact with Benjamin's figure of 'the storyteller.' I thus argue that Benjamin's figure of the storyteller is important for thinking through Franz Borkenau's account of the emergence of the 'I-form' of speech. Moreover, if we read Borkenau's linguistic account of the emergence of western individualism under the rubric of alienation, then via Benjamin we begin to see the outlines of a political return from the alienated political subject of Western modernity.

**Key Words:** critical theory; individualism; alienation; marxism; cultural studies

Stories are merely theories. Theories  
are dreams.

A dream  
is a carving knife  
and the scar it opens in the world  
is history.

Zwicky 1998:32

## I

Walter Benjamin, quoting German neuropsychiatrist Kurt Goldstein, suggests that the sociology of language begins at precisely the moment when, superseding its prehistory, sociolinguistic analysis ceases to understand language instrumentally. In other words, the sociology of language becomes a historical and material force at exactly the moment it becomes conscious – conscious that “as soon as human beings use language to establish a living relationship to themselves and to others, language

is no longer an instrument, no longer a means, but a manifestation, a revelation of our innermost being and of the psychic bond linking us to ourselves and to our fellow human beings” (Benjamin 1996c:85-86). So long as the social history of language remains ensnared in the traps of those who trade in the skins and pelts of doctrinaire theories and methodologies, approaches that “treat language as something isolated in itself,” as something dead, reified, “obeying what specialists so fondly call ‘its own laws’” (Borkenau 1981:138), it – both language as such and those disciplines that make a study of it – is complicit in the very real and pressing danger facing all of us today: “the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes” (Benjamin 2003:391.) It is this ever-present danger to which Benjamin repeatedly draws our attention and against which he himself takes up arms.

Thus, Walter Benjamin's “Problems in the Sociology of Language” cannot, productively, be read

as a mere scholarly gathering and re-presentation of information and ideas concerning the state of socially oriented studies of language at a given coordinate in 'homogeneous and empty time' – that is, in chronological history. Nor, for that matter, can Benjamin's work, in general, be read in this way. This is, at least in part, because his study of language is no different in methodological orientation from much of the rest of his work. To suggest otherwise would constitute a serious misapprehension. At the same time, a no less disingenuous interpretation of Benjamin's work would see his writing as a kind of optimistic exegesis of an imagined ameliorative potential in the continuation of the present, inferred from the detritus of history, from the decayed and decaying artifacts of the past – a mere exercise in speculative utopian idealism, or in idealism's next of kin, positivism. For the idealist "the illusion of the concrete rests on the reification of results," an analytic process, according to Theodor Adorno, that is "not unlike positive social science which records the products of social processes as ultimate facts to be accepted" (Adorno 1984:37). To be sure, Benjamin sees the refuse of history as instructive, but his project is neither, strictly speaking, contemplative, nor positivist. Rather, Benjamin's project is preparatory; it is a "methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution," without, for all that, subordinating this preparation "to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance" (Benjamin 2005b:216). And moreover, if, as Terry Eagleton suggests, Benjamin at times appears to gravitate toward a kind of Archimedean interpretive point in subjective experience, an idealist expression of a material/ideal epistemological binary rendered in rough correspondence to the 'Marxist' base/superstructure metaphor, this appearance remains superficial at best. "To leave the matter here would do Benjamin a serious injustice," serious enough that one could justifiably suspect a willful act of bad faith. "For if [Benjamin] sometimes sees 'experience' as a kind of direct impress or distillation of physical or technological forces, it remains true that he conjures out of such reflexiveness a subtlety of perception marvellously in excess of the model's own crudity" (Eagleton 2009:176).

It is in his ability to conjure meaning to life from the remains of what sometimes seems a dead epistemology that Benjamin can productively be understood as working in the mode of socio-cultural metaphor, a mode wherein we can posit a distinction between live and dead metaphor. "A live metaphor," for Benjamin, "is a [cultural] short circuit" (Zwicky 2003:68). In historical terms it is able to appropriate the energy of cultural "memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin 2003:391). In contrast, and with reference to a sociology of language fettered to an *idola organum* for example, "non-metaphorical ways of speaking conduct meaning, in insulated carriers, to certain ends and purposes. Metaphors shave off the insulation and meaning arcs across the gap" (Zwicky 2003:68). In historical and cultural terms, then, a live metaphor is a "tiger's leap into the past" (Benjamin 2003:395). As an intellectual effort devoted to the articulation of a Marxian aesthetic, Benjamin's work engages in revelatory reanimations and re-constructions (as opposed to deconstructions) of live(d) socio-cultural metaphor. His project, in broad terms should, thus, be understood as working against an instrumental conception of language in which the dead are made to toil in the service of an eternal present: "a dead metaphor is one in which the arcing between [past, present, and future, between language and history,] no longer occurs. Its energy has been diverted into and contained by the culture's linguistic grid" (Zwicky 2003:68). Against dead cultural metaphor Benjamin's project is an attempt to write the poetry of revolution. As such, "it is more than ever necessary to blast Benjamin's work out of its historical continuum so that it may fertilize the present" (Eagleton 2009:179).

## II

"I, Hlegestr from Holt made this Horn." This is an Old Norse inscription, found on a golden horn of Danish origin dating from around 400 C.E., an inscription that is one of the earliest European examples of "a linguistic peculiarity so striking," according to Franz Borkenau, "that it is a little surprising that ... due emphasis has never been laid upon it" (Borkenau 1981:133). For Borkenau, what calls for emphasis here is both the use of the first

person singular pronoun and also the way it is used in this context. In this case, unlike earlier but functionally similar inscriptions, “the ‘I’ stands before the name of the person who is ‘I’” (133). Typically, in earlier inscriptions of this kind, throughout classical European languages and indeed also in Old Norse, the first person subject is referred to in the third person, often using the proper noun only – “Toeler owns this bracelet” (133). As Borkenau points out, “every student of Latin and old [sic] Greek knows that the use of the personal pronoun as found on the golden horn of Gallehus would be inconceivable in any inscription dating from any period of classical antiquity” (Borkenau 1981:133-134).

And yet, modern linguistics, explains Borkenau, appears not to have noticed, or to have forgotten the peculiar manner in which, in fact, ‘I’ first appears. He readily concedes that linguists could hardly have failed, and indeed have not failed, to notice the contrast “between the ample use of this pronoun in the modern languages of Northern Europe and its scanty use in classical antiquity” (Borkenau 1981:135). To compare classical and modern languages directly is a tendency of those socio-linguistic analyses that assign a central phylogenetic role to a purported internal and progressive logic in language, to ‘instrumentality’ in linguistic analysis. “Thus is manifested in the field of [linguistics] what in the [sociological] sphere is noticeable in the increasing significance of statistics[:] the alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality,” an alignment that arises of the desire to “‘get closer’ to things” (Benjamin 1996e:105), and which results in the tendency to disregard the social, spatial, and temporal contexts that mediate our relationship to those things. As such, in attempting to ‘get closer’ to things, analysts and observers tend to render social agency a superfluous concern in comparative linguistics; and the overlooked result of this tendency is that “a gaze directed only at what is close at hand can at most perceive a dialectical rising and falling in the [structures and entailments of linguistic forms]” (Benjamin 1996a:251).<sup>1</sup> At the

same time, and as a corollary to an emphasis on the search for parsimonious explanations of the linguistic march toward ever greater ‘efficiency,’ an instrumentally oriented sociology of language remains almost completely blind to the anomalies that falsify its central axioms. “Contradictions [in instrumental theories of language] that cannot be ignored must be shown to be purely surface phenomena, unrelated to this mode of [analysis]” (Lukács 1971:11). For these contradictions, when taken seriously, imply the limits of instrumental language theories, limits which, like the face of death in the contemporary world, must remain hidden from sight – “today, people [prefer to] live in rooms that have never been touched by death – dry dwellers of eternity” (Benjamin 1996d:151).

In the same way that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein 2001:68), the limits to an instrumental explanation of the emergence of the ‘I-form’ of speech in the European languages mean the limits of the world of instrumental rationality in the sociology of language. Thus the analytic blind spot giving rise to the sociology of language’s failure to recognize the importance of the inscription on the horn of Gallehus. In other words, this blind spot arises out of the fact that the inscription on the Danish horn exists beyond the logic of a self-contained, instrumentally rational linguistic world. Indeed, “no expediency can be invoked to explain the use of ‘I’ before names,” says Borkenau; rather, in contrast with an explanation of linguistic phylogeny grounded in the logic of progressively rationalized efficiency, Borkenau points out that “‘I Harald did it’ is, as an inscription, not in the least more useful than ‘Harald did it.’ The latter, Latin way of expression is shorter, simpler, and more elegant” (Borkenau 1981:136).

Borkenau then proceeds from his introduction of the problem of the ‘I-form’ of speech to show, rather convincingly, that to conceive of the rise of the first person singular pronoun to widespread and common use as a mere response to a change in verb endings is largely incorrect. And yet, this is the most commonly accepted explanation among grammarians who claim that “the use of pronouns arose because the verb endings became indistinguishable. The verb in *je fais, tu fais, il fait* sounds exactly alike. It is impossible to

1 In the context of “Critique of Violence” Benjamin is concerned to articulate a critique of a kind of analysis oriented toward forms of violence in relation to the law. However, the form of his argument is also quite serviceable as a critique of approaches to the history of languages.

distinguish between them but by prefixing the pronoun” (Borkenau 1981:136). The emergence of the obligatory use of personal pronouns is thus explained with reference to the emergence of phonetically undifferentiated verb conjugations; this explanation appears parsimonious, a prized quality in social scientific theorizing, but it wholly fails to account for the fact that the ‘I-form’ of speech makes its appearance “centuries before the endings of [verbs] became indistinct. Thus there is no possibility of using this explanation in the case of old [sic] Norse, the oldest case known to us, because in old Norse the [verb] endings were perfectly clear” (Borkenau 1981:136). The facts appear rather uncooperative where language is immovably conceived in purely instrumental terms.

There is, however, a second view concerning the evolution of linguistic forms over time. And although it does not on its own contradict the instrumental explanation above, this second view of linguistic phylogeny, when taken together with the above critique puts instrumental renderings of language change further into question. At the same time, this second view sets Borkenau’s discussion off in a more productive direction. According to Borkenau, there is “a widely accepted theory about the evolution of [European] language [suggesting that] the use of the pronoun with the verb might be regarded as one element in a general development of language from the ‘synthetic’ towards the ‘analytical’” (Borkenau 1981:137). This distinction between synthetic and analytical language is not particularly complicated; it only serves to demarcate, in a general fashion, languages whose signifiers tend to bring together many ideas into a single linguistic representation – synthetic language – from languages in which there is a tendency to try to assign single signifiers to single ideas – analytical language.

The Latin said ‘feci,’ expressing in one and the same word the idea of doing, the fact that something was done in the past, and the third idea that it was ‘I’ who did it. We say ‘I have done,’ assigning one word to each of these three notions. It is maintained that the general trend of development goes from the synthetic towards the analytical, that the ancient languages are [more] synthetic, the modern languages are [more] analytical. [Borkenau 1981:137]

In view of the argument thus far, an interpretation of the historical linguistic movement from synthetic to analytical must avoid recapitulating the conditioned explanatory reflex of the dominant scholarly ideology, an intellectual maneuver that turns us forgetfully, in the words of Martin Heidegger, toward “those idols [that today] everyone has and to which [we] are wont to go cringing” (Heidegger 1993:110). In other words we must, here, avoid lapsing back into thinking about language change in instrumental terms, in terms of grammatical precision and expediency. For, as Borkenau is quick to point out, “analytical speech is not more expedient than synthetic speech, much the contrary. Nothing could be simpler than the Latin expression ‘feci,’ which needs three words to translate it into any modern language of North-Western Europe.” Moreover, “nothing, also, could be more precise. Students of classical languages know how many of their shades and refinements have been lost in our modern languages without economy of words” (Borkenau 1981:138).

As such, once we do away with an insistent dependence on a metaphysics of instrumentality, once we position ourselves such that it is plain to see that “the transition from the synthetic to the analytical mode of speech cannot ... be the result of expediency and simplification,” we begin to glimpse the emergent possibility of a different kind of story, one in which the event of the ‘I-form’ of speech can be attributed “to a fundamental change in psychology. [And] this change of psychology is connected with the deepest changes in the structure of civilization” (Borkenau 1981:138). Thus does Borkenau re-create “the chain of tradition which transmits an event from generation to generation” (Benjamin 1996d:154), amplifying the story of the horn of Gallehus from its historical moment, the one in which it was crafted, so that it resounds in the amphitheatre of experience that is the present – *refero antiquus organum*.

### III

Borkenau’s rendering of the rise of the ‘I-form’ of speech maps the chasm dividing the transmission of information from the art of storytelling, a division that manifests as two opposing intellectual approaches to cultural communication. In the mode

of information, communication is never more than a means to address or expedite present practicalities (as defined by existing power structures); storytelling, on the other hand, allows for an interpretation of the present mediated through the past, thus allowing the antagonism between story and information to be characterized in terms of a conflict between past and present. According to Benjamin, “the value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time” (Benjamin 1996d:148), indeed, it must explain itself according to its own self-sufficient – that is, natural, timeless – laws. Thus, the present here asserts its dominance over the past via a claim to its own eternal validity. The affinity between information and the metaphysics of instrumentality at play in contemporary histories of language is thus clear. Communicated as information, “no event comes to us without already being shot through with explanations” (Benjamin 1996d:147), and these explanations serve as means, as instruments and tools wielded at the behest of the socio-political exigencies of the moment in which they’re articulated, thereby eternalizing and naturalizing the present by way of a kind of ‘law-preserving violence’ committed against the past. The past is made to serve, to preserve the ‘laws’ of the present.

Indeed, insofar as the sociology of language insists on instrumentality as a central structuring principle around which to organize the intellectual labour of analysis, it mimes the relationship of the bourgeoisie to the capitalist mode of production. “For the latter it is a matter of life and death to understand its own system of production in terms of eternally valid categories: it must think of capitalism as being predestined to eternal survival by the eternal laws of nature and reason” (Lukács 1971:10-11); in other words, capitalism, like language conceived instrumentally, must be seen to operate according to its own laws, which must be preserved at all costs. Equally, to understand language as an instrument requires that the progression from synthetic to analytical language be seen as both natural and rational – and thus eternally and universally validated according to the law of progress, a vulgar reification

of scientific method in which the present mediates all of history self-referentially, that is egoistically, rather than history mediating the present, as with historical materialism. This constitutes a violence that preserves the present against the past, and against the future as well. But against those who see an eternal present as the end point of history, it is the storyteller who is “capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past” in anticipation that such a spark could ignite the present, like the mythical phoenix in her nest, so that a new and unexpected future might burst forth out of the ashes. This is because it is the storyteller, the historical materialist, who “is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he [sic] is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious” (Benjamin 2003:391).

In contrast with those who hawk and trade in information, remaining satisfied to establish “a causal nexus among various moments in history, ... [telling] the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” (Benjamin 2003:397), a storyteller has different aims. Contrasted with information, “a story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its energy and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” (Benjamin 1996d:148). In this sense, the event inscribed on the Horn of Gallehus, together with Borkenau’s analysis and re-presentation, is in the mode of storytelling, that is, in the mode of historical materialism – which seeks to redeem the past in both the present and future. In other words, the story of the Danish horn, when it comes to us as story rather than information, is not so much an isolated event to be explained as it is an event that reveals itself as a structuring element of the tissue of history, of the tissue of collective memory operating on a cellular level. For “there is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than the chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis” (Benjamin 1996d:149) – ‘I, Hlegestr from Holt, made this horn.’ And, moreover, there are few stories that have been so well integrated into our collective memory than the event inscribed upon the Danish horn, the event chronicling the new use of the personal pronoun. Indeed, “the new use of ‘I’ [in the early middle ages] reveals the emergence of a new soul, the soul of our Western civilization”

(Borkenau 1981:163). Thus, the story of Hlegestr's horn is no mere means, no tool of the ruling classes, but (and here we recall Goldstein) a manifestation, a revelation of our innermost being and of the psychic bond linking us to ourselves and to our fellow human beings.<sup>2</sup> Put another way, language is, as Marx and Engels pointed out, "practical consciousness" (Mark 1997:421). Thus, Borkenau's reference to the 'new soul' of the West is at the same time a reference to a shift in consciousness, a shift objectively expressed in language.

This new soul, this shift in consciousness, articulated in the syntax of Hlegestr's inscription expresses, according to Borkenau, "a new forcible emphasis upon the individual, a [new] reluctance to treat [the individual] as a simple element in a chain of events" (Borkenau 1981:185), in the chain of tradition. At first glance, this appears to undermine the idea that the inscription on the horn is best interpreted under the category of 'story.' After all, Benjamin suggests that one of the distinctive qualities of stories is that they are lodged firmly in tradition, lodged in collective memory in a way that "permits that slow piling up, one on top of the other, of the transparent layers [of recollection] which constitute... the most appropriate image of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of various retellings" (Benjamin 1996d:150). But only a minimum of reflection on Hlegestr's horn brings us easily to the conclusion that the object itself (and also the inscription with which we are concerned) *is* firmly lodged in tradition. In part, it is the inscription's revolutionary nature, its profound expression of a point in the constellation of our history that suggests this to us. For by its very nature, revolution, from the historical materialist's perspective, is only possible on the basis of history, real material history. Marx worked this out at length in his critiques of German idealism. And according to Benjamin's powerful interpretation of Marx, revolution "is nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren" (Benjamin 2003:394). The story of the 'I-form' of speech is thus one of the earliest records of the modern struggle to overcome the

domination of the present by the past, of the living by the dead, of the struggle to redeem the past in the present. As such, the inscription on Hlegestr's horn, is a chronicle, an early episode in the history of this struggle, an episode whose setting coincides exactly with the home of the storyteller.

There are two archetypes of the storyteller. According to Benjamin, "If we wish to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, we find one in the settled tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman" (Benjamin 1996d:144). But as Benjamin goes on to point out, in actuality stories arise with the interpenetration of these two archetypes.

Such an interpenetration was achieved particularly in the middle ages, through the medieval trade structure. The resident master craftsman and the itinerant journeyman worked together in the same rooms; and every master had been an itinerant journeyman before he settled down in his hometown or somewhere else. If peasants and seamen were the past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. [Benjamin 1996d:144]

That Hlegestr was a craftsman hardly bears mentioning, since he tells us this himself. But that he was a journeyman, or was descended from journeymen, or rather from seamen, requires some further evidence. Borkenau's theory, in this respect, is incomplete. But drawing from the work of H. de Tourville who writes from the Le Play school of sociology (sometimes called social geography), Borkenau advances a rather alluring theory, particularly given what Benjamin says about the archetypes of the figure of the storyteller.

According to Borkenau, de Tourville makes the claim that changes in the structure of the family (from extended patriarchal to particularist – what we would call nuclear), the result of Scandinavian settlers' encounters with the geography of Norway "where no large patriarchal family could have lived and where a man was entirely dependent upon himself alone," were responsible for that attitude which, in Borkenau's words, "the English describe by the term 'individualism'" (Borkenau 1981:171). However, Borkenau promptly rejects this theory because it is in conflict with the linguistic record he has been at

<sup>2</sup> See Benjamin 1996c:85-86 and Benjamin 2003:138, previously cited above..

pains to trace out; the emergence of the I-form of speech arises in “what is today Denmark and Sweden, more so than in Norway” (Borkenau 1981:171). In addition, Borkenau argues that while Norwegian geography would indeed make large patriarchal families unsustainable, “there are few places in the world where the existence of such [family] units would be more favored by nature than in Denmark” (171), the location where we do, in fact, see the first articulations of the ‘I-form’ of speech. And yet, while Borkenau raises a number of other salient objections to de Tourville’s conclusions, he also suggests that de Tourville’s “find is,” for all that, “no less of the greatest importance” (Borkenau 1981:172). For it is de Tourville’s general approach that inspires Borkenau to look at the movement of peoples over land and sea to help explain the rise of the ‘I-form’ of speech. De Tourville “argues, roughly speaking that a new type of ‘individualism’ is the basis of Western civilization and that it can be distinguished, first in Scandinavia, then in England and Germany, and finally in France;” and here Borkenau concurs: “that is exactly what [his] language test, centered round the personal pronoun, reveals” (Borkenau 1981:172).

However, where de Tourville attributes the emergence of the ‘particularist’ family, of European individualism, deterministically, to the influence of natural geography, to nature, Borkenau attributes the emergence of the ‘I-form’ of speech to the life of the people in question. For it is only partly true, what Adorno and Horkheimer say in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that “*mana*, the moving spirit, is not a projection but the echo of the real preponderance of nature in the weak psyches of primitive people” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007:10-11). Rather, there is, in our experience of nature, and the so-called ‘nature of things’, always some minute element of projection as well. In addition, Borkenau’s study of the emergence and spread of personal pronouns identifies one additional source aside from Old Norse, contributing to this linguistic development – Old Irish. And if we recall that one of Benjamin’s archetypes for the storyteller is the trading seaman we are now in a position to see where Borkenau and Benjamin finally meet up face to face, so to speak. For Borkenau, “the basic law governing this entire process

[of linguistic transformation] becomes visible” in the character of the itinerant seafaring journeyman. This process “has no mysterious connection with [natural or ethnic] roots. The Irish, the Saxons, and the Vikings are its carriers, because they are the three peoples who in the course of the *Voelkerwanderung* make the transition from land migration to overseas migration” (Borkenau 1981:182). And in the course of this migration they become not poorer in communicable experience, but richer in the experience of a certain kind of freedom, communicable via the ‘I-form’ of speech.

In contrast with those peoples “who moved overland clanwise, with women, children, cattle, and mobile goods,” Borkenau argues that it was those who set out “for the crossing of the sea ... for a new home and a new sense of activity on the other shore, without the ballast of family and possessions” (Borkenau 1981:181), that became rich in the experience of individual freedom. These people were, perhaps, the first to liberate themselves from the bonds of nature, sublimated and experienced in the form of the patriarchal family.

The veiled misty line which separates land and sea all over the North has proved to be the frontier between the slavish collective bondage of the individual and the freedom of the person. Up to this line, semi-nomadic migrant tribes prevailed. But he who crossed it sailed into a new, proud I-consciousness – into a new freedom from which the new Western culture was to arise. [Borkenau 1981:182]

Thus does Borkenau, storyteller of linguistic sociology, chronicle the cultural alchemy that turns *mana* – the appearance of subjective agency located in nature – into *aura* – the appearance of subjective agency located in the particular individual.

#### IV

It is in the telling and re-telling of the emergent history of the ‘I-form’ of speech that we begin to decipher the stories, theories, and dreams manifest and revealed as mythos of the Western individual – ego. And “though *mythos* originally meant but ‘word’ (being the Homeric equivalent for *logos*), the

important consideration for the present purposes is that it came to mean a tale, story, fable, a *narrative form*” (Burke 1996:380). It is here that the sociology of language comes to recognize the nature of the psycho-civilizational violence bound up with the aetiologically colonizing (in a sense lawmaking, or norm producing) event of the inscription on the Horn of Gallehus, an event inscribed as an open secret, like a scar, into our collective memory, into the history of the West. For “here ‘history’ is but a more ‘cosmic’ word for ‘story,’ a usage in line with the analogy between books and the ‘Book of Nature’” (Burke 1996:381). It is in these ‘books,’ these stories – chronicles of the movement of subjective agency which at first resides in the cosmos and then, in promethean fashion, moves to the realm of the human subject, the individual – that we catch glimpses of the relationship between ourselves and nature, between ourselves and language, between ourselves and our world – and thus our history – past, present, and future.

This relationship is mimetic; as Marx observed, “consciousness can never be anything else except conscious existence” (Marx 1997:414). As such, collective consciousness, the ‘soul’ of a civilization, exists in mimetic relationship to activity. For “it is the activity of each individual which immediately motivates his [sic] manner of understanding the world and of thinking about himself. . . . It is because many individuals do the same thing and live in the same manner that they also think in the same manner” (Henry 1984:123). Thus Borkenau’s claims about the relationship between that proud freedom into which we, as a culture, sailed via oversea migration, and the subsequent emergence of our ‘I-form’ of speech. What accounts for the spread of the ‘I-form’ of speech, of the consciousness of individual freedom expressed in linguistic practice is that “the very greatest capacity for the generation of similarities . . . belongs to humans” (Benjamin 2005a:694). As such, it is the mimetic faculty – our capacity for generating similarities – that helps account for the fact that not all Europeans were seafaring travelers, but also that by the early modern period most languages of Western Europe had more or less incorporated and made habitual the use of personal pronouns. And

now we see, a little more clearly, how a story preserves itself, storing up its socio-historical energy so that over a long period of time “all these similar thoughts form, [mimetically], what might be termed the ideology of a class, [the soul of a civilization, or a mode of production]” (Henry 1984:123).

At the same time, it is in this history, in Borkenau’s story, that we encounter an example of the allure of the beautiful, of the work of art scaled up to the magnitude of civilizations. And moreover, Borkenau’s work, his weaving of the story of the language of the west, is yet another confirmation that “never yet has a true work of art been grasped other than where it ineluctably represented itself as a secret” (Benjamin 1996b:351). For our ability to decipher, to interpret, to read a secret is bound up in our encounters with stories. To read a secret, to tell a story is, after all, always a task of “interpretation, which is concerned not [solely] with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with [deciphering] the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world” (Benjamin 1996d:153). This is the essence of the work of art, of the beautiful in its veil, that it is embedded in experience in such a way that it is only visible as beautiful through a veil, as a secret. When the object is entirely obscured by the veil, when the veil itself is taken for the unmediated object, we are in the presence of mere, monstrous ideology, superstition, or some such other destructive, all consuming fantasy. On the other hand, in the complete absence of a veil, beauty – culture – disappears, or rather, would never have existed. Under such conditions – conditions that belong to our animal pre-history in which there is no communication between us and our world – we would simply, were we able to go back, have “deteriorated to the level of dumb beasts” (Thompson 1998:8), darting after that which holds our attention only for a discreet period of time, then moving on, the way we engage with information.

Our ability to decipher and interpret, to veil an object such that its beauty might appear, is a function of our mimetic faculty and resides, in its earliest articulations, in the domain of occult practice (astrology, etc). This ability is always more than a simple reactionary “cry of terror called forth by the



unfamiliar” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007:10). It is also an attempt to enter into a relationship with the unfamiliar, to enter into “an interplay between nature and humanity” (Benjamin 1996e:107).

If, at the dawn of humanity, this reading from the 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 development over thousands of years, thus creating for itself in language and writing the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity. [Benjamin 2005a:697].

After all, what is nonsensuous similarity if not secret semblance, veiled semblance? For what is essential to any secret is that in order that it should not slip into the oblivion of forgetting, such that the object disappears completely behind its veil, it must always be discoverable in the interpretation of objects and events. Hegel's inscription is just such an object and event. It provides us with a departure point for an interpretive exploration of the movement of ‘aura’ in the west. And what it reveals is that ‘aura’ collects around the ‘I-form’ of speech, around the individual, as a function of our proud new consciousness. And this pride is based on the feeling of freedom that arises with the emergence of Western individualism, a feeling expressed in a practical consciousness in which the personal pronoun, the ‘I,’ usurps syntactic priority in the grammar of the West. It does so by generating its own tradition, by the repetition and re-production of similarities.

But if it is the feeling of freedom that veils the object of beauty in this story, then the object behind the veil is the experience of individuality. And as we said earlier, those that sailed into the new freedom of the individual found themselves not poorer in experience, but richer in the experience of a certain kind of freedom, the freedom from kin and the trappings of society. In short, this free individuality, stripped of its veil (and here this stripping is to be marked off from mere absence of the veil), comes to appear as its other, as what Marx identified under the rubric

of alienation and estrangement – this is the revealed secret, the scar, of the ‘I-form’ of speech. Thus, “the divine ground of the being of beauty,” divine because it demands sacrifice in order to halt its slide into to its other, alienation, “lies in the secret ... [and] not in the superfluous veiling of things in themselves but rather the necessary veiling of things for us” (Benjamin 1996b:351). In order that our newfound individual freedom not be marched naked into the cruel light under which it is revealed as alienation we sacrifice what might have born the fruit of a harmonious social order, the virginal socio-politics of Western antiquity, to this alienation. Thus the object in its veil is no mere false consciousness, no mere opiate; rather, the price paid for individual freedom is alienation.

What becomes visible in the story of the ‘I-form’ of speech is that the secret of the freedom of the individual is her social alienation. It is the free individual whose chronicle adorns Hegel's horn, who leaves home and kin behind, who like Goethe's Doctor Faust feels free to create with impunity, indebted to no one, and who finally becomes the primary bearer of aura through the middle ages and into modernity. So when Marx says that “man [sic] is a species being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species as his object (his own as well as those of other things), but – and this is only another way of expressing it – but also because he treats himself as the actual living species” (Marx 2007:74), he gives expression to what we might call the aura of the free individual. And aura, here filched from the tradition of the patriarchal family, sublimated nature, takes over from the earliest attempts to gain some degree of control over nature proper. Mana – the magic that seeks control over nature, nature which is thought to be inescapable and unchangeable if not necessarily implacable – transfers to the individual who comes to see herself as subjective agent, the ‘here and now’ of history. Thus, the mimetic faculty, the faculty of generating similarity, via the generation of nonsensuous similarities, transubstantiates ancient mana into medieval and modern aura. In exchange, nature appears to give itself up, to sacrifice itself to the human subject. This occurs “by an unconscious ruse,” whereby “human beings first began to distance themselves from nature.” This occurs, in other words,

through the technique of play (Benjamin 1996e:107). Nevertheless, even if by the transubstantiation of mana to aura via the 'I' incantation, the human subject really does succeed in achieving a distance from nature, there is a price to be paid. It is that we create a second nature, so to speak, a human nature that takes on mythic proportions and which ultimately harvests all subjective historical agency to itself. The reign of the individual is short-lived, and while the 'I-form' of speech remains, the veil of freedom is ultimately torn from the individual, leaving her "to be manipulated [and re-clothed, uniformed,] in the interests of fascism" (Benjamin 1996e:101-102), or rather, if we wish to use the most up to date terminology, Neoliberalism.

## V

Marshall McLuhan once wrote that "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us." (quoted in Lorimer and Scannel 1994:139). This is clear in the story of the emergence of the individual announced on Hlegestr's horn. For if the 'I-form' of speech is, figuratively speaking, a tool (practical consciousness) that aims not at mastery over nature (instrumentality), but instead at gaining a degree of autonomy from it, autonomy that in turn enables a freedom of interaction between individuals and also between ourselves and nature, then it does so, as Benjamin suggests, in *play*. Nevertheless, with the rise of individualism comes, also, alienated existence. And since the experience of separation from family and community gives rise to the chimera of freedom and alienation in the cultural sphere, the mimetic spread of the 'I-form' of speech represents the repetition and reproduction that is "the transformation of a shattering experience into habit" (Benjamin 2005d:120). This repetition and reproduction that helps to account for the spread of the 'I-form' of speech is, according to Benjamin, the essence of play. So if the emergence of individuality at first appears to threaten the stability of aura in the ancient extended family it does this only so that it can take aura, subjective agency, unto itself – so that I, the individual, might imagine myself capable of creating my world. Thus the rise of the 'I-form' of speech is a self-conscious attempt to redeem the individual by asserting the primacy of the present over the past, while at the same time attempting to

establish a tradition in which individuality might take over from nature as the agent of history – a project that appears doomed from its inception.

For as we distance ourselves, estrange ourselves, from the realm of nature and from one another, in so doing we "estrangle the species from [ourselves]," and thereby in playing the role of individual, "turn the life of the species into a means of individual life" (Marx 2007:74, italics removed). For it is in 'play,' playing at individuality, that we create this distance from nature, which via the mimetic faculty reproduces the I-consciousness, the 'I-form' of speech throughout the European middle ages, modernity, and into the contemporary global world. But as soon as this transformation is complete, history grinds to a halt, for the essence of play – "imitation" – "is at home in the playing, not in the plaything" (Benjamin 2005c:116). It is in the nature of games, of play, that subjectivity, aura, ultimately transfers to the game once individuality ceases "ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself" (Gadamer 2006:107) and assumes the role of 'player,' a reification of the agency found in process of play; in other words, this reification "makes individual life in its abstract form the purpose of the species" (Marx 2007:75) of the game. It is this abstraction that is at once foundational for the mimetic faculty, for reproduction and repetition, and at the same time undermines subjective aspirations to historical agency – the engendering of habit, of tradition. For, it can "be stated that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition" (Benjamin 1996e:105, italics removed). Thus aura, subjectivity, accrues to the system, the apparatus, the game, in which the individual becomes a token of the authenticity of the game itself, of the mode of production.

While the individual rises up initially against the collective bondage of the ancient world, it is in play, abstraction, that she is once again enchained, all the while singing the tune of the 'I-form' of speech. For the unconscious ruse by which the individual, trickster of the modern epoch, begins to move away from traditional nature contains within itself a second trick that itself goes unnoticed at the crucial moment at which the individual feels himself to be on the verge of mastering history. As such, the individual

in this hubristic state proves ripe for harvest by the machines, the machinations of capital. Thus, “the real subject of the game (this is shown precisely by those experiences in which there is only a single player) is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself” (Gadamer 2006:106). And insofar as the game, the mode of production is, without question, capitalism, the players – free individuals, I’s – come into view as everywhere the same – alienated playthings of capital. The veil of freedom falls away: “this stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of aura [around the individual], is the signature of a perception whose ‘sense for sameness’ in the world has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique” (Benjamin 1996e:105), the ‘here and now,’ the particularity of the individual.

If what remains of Hlegestr’s incantation and Borkenau’s story is only the self-alienation of the individual (and under contemporary capitalism, capitalism at the end of history, one is hard-pressed to make a convincing case to the contrary), then it appears that nothing remains for us except to continue playing the existing game, seeking satisfaction in our relative successes, or alternately to withdraw from it to the extent possible, a task that ultimately goes against the pleasure principle (and also the necessities of material existence) structured into playing itself. The latter course of action, moreover, seems to require us to give up the ‘I-form’ of speech and attempt a u-turn in the middle of the one way street of history, a course of action that has generally met with disaster in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, if we wish instead to transcend our reified existence as the playthings of capital, then it seems we must return to a sense of play that continually seeks to restructure and reinvent the games we play. This would involve, at minimum (and would only just constitute a point of departure), a recognition that if the second nature in which we’ve become enmeshed, the game we’ve invented as a means by which to distance ourselves from nature proper, is a product of both material social conditions and the mimetic faculty, and not simply an attempt to master nature, then it is possible to reinterpret instrumentality, which in its current

form merely seeks to carry over the impulse to master nature (mana) into our second nature. For this impulse arises out of the hazy recognition that this second nature, “an abstract form of domination,” is responsible for the “increasingly fragmented character of ... individual existence in that society” (Postone 1996:17). And yet, this abstract form of domination is, more often than not, poorly recognized; thus we fumble about in the depths of the past searching for strategies to solve the challenges of the game in which we have become mere players.

At the same time, even if the ‘I-form’ of speech (individuality) helped propel our history toward the alienation and estrangement pervading social life under capitalism, this is ultimately a function of the way individuality must play the game of capital. In other words, the contemporary problems associated with individualism, with neoliberal individualism, arise not of the consciousness of individuals as individuals, but of individualism under capitalism. For we have reached a point in history when the individual, indeed all individuals, are the players and capitalism does the playing. This is not to say that there is no agency whatsoever for the individual, but rather, it is to make a distinction between everyday subjectivity and the socio-historical subject. Thus, the philosophy of history here reasserts its centrality as a philosophic-political concern. For while individual subjects under capital do exercise a degree of subjectivity, they remain largely alienated from socio-historical subjectivity. “Subjectivity and the socio-historical Subject, in other words, must be distinguished in [our] analysis;” this is because “the identification of the identical subject-object with determinate structures of social relations has very important implications for a theory of subjectivity” (Postone 2003:87).

As Moishe Postone points out, “It was Marx,” and, we should add, Benjamin in the cultural sphere, “who first addressed adequately the problems with which [the] modern philosophy [of history] had wrestled. [They] did so by changing the terms of those problems, grounding them socially and historically in the social [and cultural] forms of capitalism expressed by categories such as the commodity, [by play and mimesis, and by re-production]” (Postone

2003:79). And in so doing, Marx was able to neutralize those bourgeois concepts of socialism that sought to “identify with a social agent the concept of the identical subject-object with which Hegel,” for example, “sought to overcome the subject-object dichotomy of classical epistemology” (Postone 2003:87). This is possible because subjectivity and the agent of history now interact with each other, and with traditional nature, via the second nature, the game, engendered by the rise of the ‘I-consciousness.’ In similar fashion to Marx, but in the sphere of culture, Benjamin was able to “neutralize a number of traditional concepts – such as creativity, genius, eternal value and mystery” (Benjamin 1996e:101). In so doing, the individual, the ‘I’ of the horn of Gallehus, ceases to stumble about in search of the firm ground of cultural authenticity, of tradition, and takes its stand elsewhere; in other words, “instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics” (Benjamin 1996e:106, italics removed). This means that the alienated individual, no longer the subjective agent of history under capitalism, retains the ability via politics to overcome her reified contemporary existence.

For, the practice of politics takes place, like play, in the mode of repetition and reproduction. But unlike those practices founded on ritual, practices that exist ‘under’ rather than ‘in interaction with’ traditional, proper nature, practices “that culminate in human sacrifice,” and whose results “are valid once and for all,” politics “are wholly provisional ([they] operate by means of experiments and endlessly varied test procedure)” (Benjamin 1996e:107). If, in the first case, the aspiration to historical subjectivity is voiced in terms of the problem of the historico-epistemological “knowing individual (or supra-individual) subject and its relation to an external (or externalized) world, to the forms of social relations, considered as determinations of social subjectivity as well as objectivity,” then under the rubric of politics “the problem of knowledge now becomes a question of the relationship between forms of social mediation and forms of thought” (Postone 2003:87). Thus the constellations between thought and mediation can be rearranged, improved via experiment and endlessly varied test procedure.

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek is fond of quoting Samuel Beckett: “try again, fail again, fail better” (Beckett 1996:101). This sums up what it means to understand politics as an endlessly varied test procedure. This is what it means to retain the individual ‘I-form’ of consciousness and still throw off the yoke of capitalist alienation. And if experiment, repetition, and reproduction – articulations of the mimetic faculty – are indeed central to contemporary human activities, then it becomes clear that we no longer need wait for the game itself to announce the time for revolution. That time is now, here at the end of history, and indeed we need only take to ‘play’ once again in order to grasp hold of and make real the idea that “every second,” from here on out, is an opportunity, a “small gateway in time through which the [revolution] might enter” (Benjamin 2003:397). Thus, praxis beckons us to gather and pay our respects to the alienated individual of history hitherto.

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