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Just Being Difficult?

Academic Writing in the Public Arena

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Values of Difficulty

I AM WONDERING how to write this essay. Will I be intelligible or not? And if I am intelligible, does that mean that I have succeeded? And if I am not quite intelligible, or if I am unintelligible, then will that be a failure of communication? Or will it be making a different point? This is a rhetorical predicament I am in, writing here, and it is one not only I am in, but which many of us are in as we try to explain why certain kinds of scholarship in the humanities assume the voice that they sometimes do. In many venues, these days, there is an obligation, a need, to make clear what we do. And this is not always easy because what we do is not always easy. It is sometimes necessary to take up the challenge of making clear what we do, of making clear what we do without precisely denying what we do. That the presentation cannot and will not always conform to modes of communication that are familiar and consoling may seem to some as if the project of communication has failed. But is it not part of a critical practice, a critical approach to language and, indeed, to rhetoric, to ask what constitutes the norms of communicability, and what challenges them, and how it is that a critical consideration of the norm and its challenges forms part of the project of a comparative approach to literature? Indeed, the norms that govern communicability are not singular, and if they were, there would be no place for translation, no need to ask, how might I make this text communicable here and there? Or how can it travel? And what are the limits to its traveling? Part of my point will be that to pass through what is difficult and unfamiliar is an essential part of critical thinking within the academy today, an academy whose dedication to "comparative" work is not a field or subfield of its operation but a fundamental and irreversible condition of communication itself. I hope to make clear along the way that this passage, which is not smooth, through the unfamiliar and the difficult is especially crucial for a version of the humanities

that seeks to maintain a connection to social theory and to the project of social and political transformation. Whereas some critics, such as Rorty, have suggested that literature is deprived of its inspirational possibility once it becomes sullied by the work of social theory and social science, I would like to suggest that it is virtually impossible to think the practice of criticism, much less critique, without this important implication of literary theory in its relation to social life. I will be making a counterpoint, however, as well, about the specificity of literary language and the limits of its translatability into social theory.

A certain paradox has emerged within debates on the politics of language. The questions of how we speak and to whom we speak are traditionally rhetorical problems. They become acute when we seek not only to speak but to persuade, and to persuade others of our political views. Now, one view on this problem, a view from the left, is that it is therefore crucial that we speak in ways that most people can understand, that we reach them where they live so that the "we" who speaks and the "them" to whom we speak are not separated, so that we are a member of the very community that is our audience. That same position holds that it is important that we reach the largest audience possible with our views and that politics relies fundamentally on a rhetoric with popular appeal. What this means for academics on the left is not only that it will be important to speak in a way that does not become lost to the internal workings of academic language but that it will be important to take popular culture as an object and venue for academic work itself. I take it that this position is one that insists that any progressive use of politics must be popular, and it must be popular in several senses: it must reach a wide audience, it must address topics that concern most people, and it must speak in the language of the broader community.

This strikes me as a sound view. But I do want to outline a paradox, and the other side of the paradox looks like this: Adorno and others working in the context of critical theory made the argument that one of the most important ways to call into question the status quo is by engaging language in nonconventional ways. He worried, and surely many others worried as well, that language gives us a world, a sense of its meaning and its intelligibility, and that many assumptions about how the world should be are built into language use. I take it that he did not mean that whatever we say the world is, is the way the world appears but rather that certain kinds of assumptions about, for instance, the natural status of money, the inevitable existence of class structure, of what the human is, of "who" constitutes the human, of what the limits of community are, of "who" is included in prevailing notions of community, what communicable speech might be, "who" is intelligible and who is not are embedded in the everyday use of language. Now, this use may appear to be "common," but here again we have to ask: whose language

assumes the status of "common" language, who polices the "common," and what uses of language are thereby ruled out as uncommon or, indeed, unintelligible? Adorno thus claimed that a critical theory must use language in ways that call into question its everyday assumptions, precisely because some of the most problematic views about reality have become sedimented in everyday parlance. His worry was that to speak in ways that are already accepted as intelligible is precisely to speak in ways that do not make people think critically, ways that accept the status quo and do not make use of the resource of language to rethink the world radically.

So this strikes me as an interesting and sound view, even though it appears to be in conflict with the first view that I laid out above. Whereas the first view claims that any left position must speak the language of the popular, the second worries that the language of the popular is that of an uncritical consumerism. Whereas the first might accuse the second of elitism, and with some justification, and might also claim that forms of critical consumerism exist, that popular culture, including popular language, is a scene for critical subversion of the status quo, the second might accuse the first of selling out thought or, indeed, of premising politics on a dogmatic anti-intellectualism.

Surely there are a number of viewpoints that fall between the two I have just outlined. There are those, for instance, who might claim that critical theory does not need to be popular or have an effect on what is popular, that its value is intellectual and that it does not need to change the world or always be referred to the project of changing the world. And there are others who might claim that changing the world is the paramount thing and that it will always be a pragmatic consideration which language to use in the process or who might feel that language is one instrument among many for effecting that transformation. It is also unclear that what Adorno means by "common sense" is the same as what defenders of popular culture mean by the "popular." Surely, popular culture can function to challenge common sense; the popular is not one, and it is often the venue for minority cultures to weigh in against high culture, often the vehicle through which the new comes into confrontation with what has been commonly accepted.

So what do I mean by *critical?* I will turn to Adorno to see what might be made of this term, but here are a few remarks to keep in mind: Adorno was an elitist, and his views on popular culture are for the most part radically lamentable. He thought that film stupefied the senses and dulled the critical mind, that jazz lacked the proper characteristics of culture: even the most generous reader of his work would be hard-pressed not to call those reflections of his racist. So my point will not be to embrace Adorno but to let him represent one extreme within a reflection that I hope to conduct, a reflection that seeks to embrace a paradox without precisely resolving it.

So, with such caveats in mind, let me cite a passage from Adorno, one that

illustrates his deep distrust of communicability, a distrust that would be nearly impossible to hear replicated within our current cultural climate. Adorno put his view most acutely in his *Minima Moralia*,[1] a text he wrote while in exile in New York and published in 1951 in Germany:

> A writer will find that the more precisely, conscientiously, appropriately he expresses himself, the more obscure the literary result is thought, whereas a loose and irresponsible formulation is at once rewarded with certain understanding. It avails nothing ascetically to avoid all technical expressions, all allusions to spheres of culture that no longer exist. Rigour and purity in assembling words, however simple the result, create a vacuum. Shoddiness that drifts with the flow of familiar speech is taken as a sign of relevance and contact: people know what they want because they know what other people want. Regard for the object, rather than for communication, is suspect in any expression: anything specific, not taken from pre-existent patterns, appears inconsiderate, a symptom of eccentricity, almost of confusion. The logic of the day, which makes so much of its clarity, has naively adopted this perverted notion of everyday speech. Vague expression permits the hearer to imagine whatever suits him and what he already thinks in any case. Rigorous formulation demands unequivocal comprehension, conceptual effort, to which people are deliberately discouraged, and imposes on them in advance of any content a suspension of all received opinions, and thus an isolation, that they violently resist. Only what they do not need first to understand, they consider understandable, only the word coined by commerce, and really alienated, touches them as familiar. Few things contribute so much to the demoralization of intellectuals. Those who would escape it must recognize the advocates of communicability as traitors to what they communicate. (101)

Adorno, of course, belonged to that earlier formulation of critical theory that believed that social criticism ought not to be separated from aesthetics and that, in particular, a critical perspective must actively trouble the received conventions of language, risking a certain "isolation" from common-held standards of linguistic satisfaction. Of course, this has always been the conceit of high literary modernism, namely, that the world can only be given anew when redescribed by heightened and unconventional language that reworks the settled meanings of words into those that are explicitly unconventional. Within literary modernism the point of undoing conventional forms of communication was to produce the new, and the new had a value, since it seemed to signify cultural progress and the possibility of renewing a sense of experience out from under the shackles of technology. Part of what critical theory did in its pre-Habermasian phase was to transpose this insight of literary modernism into social theory. Thus, the question of language became central to the rethinking of social reality. Language not only communicates to us about a ready-made world but gives us a world, and gives it to us or, indeed, withholds it from us by virtue of the terms it uses. Then the critical question emerges: what world is given to us through language, and how

might the alteration of our language give us a different sense of world? Is one way that social reality, capital, class difference, relations of subordination and exclusion come to seem natural and familiar precisely through the language that impounds these notions in a subtle and daily way into our sense of reality? And if this sense of reality is built up, solidified, rendered immutable, imprisoned through repeated kinds of language use, then where do we intervene on that repetitive use to transform the world into a site of possible action and of possible transformation?

It may seem that I am asking for a certain kind of emancipation through language, but I do not mean to be so happy. Adorno makes clear in the above that the risk of difficult thinking is a certain isolation and estrangement, so it is not a bounteously collective moment in which critical thinking emerges. Indeed, it can come from the depths of isolation. One might object and say that Adorno moves too quickly to identify the familiarity of the common with consumerist notions of satisfaction and that the reason writing must risk obscurity and isolation is therefore to establish a perspective that is not immediately co-opted by consumer culture. Although Adorno may have all sorts of misbegotten ideas about consumer culture, he does have an idea of what makes a perspective critical. The demand that language deliver what is already understandable appears to be a demand to be left alone with what one already knows. But Adorno gives this notion of self-satisfied ignorance a twist when he writes, "Only what they do not need first to understand, they consider understandable." The "they" here do not need to understand, and that very need not to understand conditions their judgment about what is understandable. The paradox that emerges is that what is not understood becomes what is best understood, and for Adorno this is no understanding at all; it is, in fact, a defense against understanding, one performed and maintained in the name of understanding itself.

Of course, one political response to such a view is to claim that to reach people and to have effects one must write in an accessible and popular way. And perhaps it is that Adorno fails to understand the critical or subversive potential within consumer culture itself. But is he also making another point about criticality that might be separated from his claim about consumer culture? Is he telling us that the moment in which understanding is challenged and risked is the one in which a critical perspective emerges? Is this not the moment, the occasion, when I come to recognize that it is my ignorance, and my tenacious hold on ignorance, that dictates what I will come to call communicable knowledge? What does it say about me when I insist that the only knowledge I will validate is one that appears in a form that is familiar to me, that answers my need for familiarity, that does not make me pass through what is isolating, estranging, difficult, and demanding?

Adorno is not referring to certain kinds of truths that are hard to take but

rather to the way in which those truths are presented, a presentation that is essential to the truth that is articulated. If communication does not take place through familiar conventions that house and protect my ignorance, then does it take place at all? If I call "communicability" that moment in which I already know the convention by which communication takes place, what risk of difference do I foreclose, and what form of cultural parochialism do I protect?

To say that the communication of truth depends on its presentation is to say that such communication is rhetorical. This means that the presentation of truth that is made may well produce meanings that call into question the truth that is communicated or add something more, something different, to what is explicitly intended. The language in which one offers one's views does not always carry the meanings that one intends, and our words often return to us as hauntings from another order. For words are not first spoken and then received, they are received and spoken, received and imparted at once in the act of speaking. That I am born into a language does not mean that it speaks me as if I am its ventriloquization, but it does speak as I speak, and my voice is never fully or exclusively my own. Indeed, I speak and listen, and then later ask, "Who was speaking there?" And the answer may not be conclusively given. That the speech act is not governed by the intention by which it is animated does not mean that there is no intention, only that the intention does not govern. That the intention does not govern does not mean that it does not sometimes orchestrate and effect its intention, only that if it does, it is lucky. Similarly, this does not mean that we cannot fully intend to get across a certain point, but we should probably be aware that even the same words resonate differently, depending on the semantic dimensions of their circulation, and that our intentions will become derailed to some extent in the course of the trajectory of our words. I think that this situation is not simply reducible to a formal character of language, to a relation between intention and force, or to fields of intention and fields of reception but takes its own specific form within the context of a multicultural linguistic condition. The use of a term or a locution in one context may or may not travel appropriately into the next.

This happens surely with contemporary human rights discourse, where rights are attached to kinds of persons or practices that make no sense in one cultural venue and are, as it were, the foundation of sense in another. And it happens when we consider the term *universality*, which, by definition, should include all people, and it is regularly misunderstood by those it describes, or refused by those it includes, or used in syntactical ways that are incompatible with other such uses. And speaking locally, for the moment, this problem of translation, and its limits, takes place in gay politics as well, a lesson learned from AIDS activism in the 1980s, when activists sought to enter Spanish-

speaking communities, for instance, to do AIDS outreach by asking who was "homosexual" only to find that very few people would answer to the term. When they returned to ask who practiced anal sex with other men, many more people came forth, and a lesson was thereby learned by Anglo activists. To engage in activism is not to start with the concept of a shared language but to be prepared to find that communication can sometimes take place only when the terms that initiate a discussion undergo an expropriation that bears no resemblance to the original, where the term abandons the animating conditions of its own efficacy in order to live elsewhere as another term or as a term subjected to a radically unanticipated use.

Such examples make at least two points about political rhetoric that I would like to underscore today. The first is that we may think that effective activism requires that we use language that is direct, straightforward, and commonsensical. Indeed, we may even think that a popular democratic movement must use the language of the people, and we may even conjecture that we know what that language is and how best to use it. But if one of the tasks of activism is to cross cultural barriers in a nonimperialist fashion, that is, to learn how to speak across various languages in ways that do not assimilate this variety of languages to a dominant notion of speech, then it seems to me that we must do without a notion of common language. And although some may think that doing away with common sense and a common language is the sure road toward divisiveness, it seems to me that accepting the heterogeneity of language is a necessary point of departure for any left politics that does not seek to reestablish the terms of cultural dominance through recourse to what is publicly accepted as the doxa of the common.

The second point is that there is no effective politics without accepting translation as the common predicament. To claim that translation is a common predicament is not to claim that there is a common language among us but only that speech will require translation to be received, that activism that seeks to extend information in particular (and we can think of many instances in which that is the paramount goal of activism) will founder if it does not take up the task of translation. What I mean here is that even the core terms, the ones we cannot do without, such as *universality* and *justice* and *equality*, the ones we believe are essential to politics, do not have a simple or already established meaning. And although we often think that we must secure the meaning of such terms before we can proceed, that otherwise we will have no anchor and no ground, we will find that as soon as these terms enter into a political field, they are contested and that no recourse to an ideal or precultural semantics will settle the question of what they mean or, indeed, within institutions, how they will mean. The question, for instance, of how *universality* means, and how *universality might mean*, is an

example of one key question that must remain open for politics to maintain its status as a critical enterprise, for it to resist the lure of foundational certainties that reduce it to the doldrums of dogmatism. And it may be that there are different ways, within different languages, within different political syntaxes, of understanding *universality*, but it also might be that that term has no translation in certain contexts and that a certain failure of translation is presented there for us to undergo. For when we assume that translation is possible, we assume that every language, every political syntax has a place for what we call *universality*, but that place may not be a place: it may be an inflexion, it may be a sign for colonialism, it may be no sign at all. And then we will be up against the limits of universality, for if it cannot translate everywhere, then the only way it can translate is through ignoring what it finds, through an imperialist move that claims to find itself in the Other, or through a developmental perspective that assumes that the colonized has not yet assumed the insights of the colonizer and that it is the white man's burden to prod them along. And this challenge to translatability—its interruption, its arrested moment—is the one that compels the violence of a certain colonial expansionism, but it is also the possibility of meeting up with the limits of our own epistemological horizon, a limit that challenges what we know to be knowable, a limit that can always and only function as the radically unfamiliar within the domain of ordinary language, plain speaking, common sense.

And although this is a philosophical point, and in some ways a political point, I want to make it again briefly and to make it through a brief reference to Henry James, not because he is a political hero or because he represents brilliant class politics but because the kind of difficulty he presents for us is one with a clear ethical implication. And then finally, briefly, I'd like to return to it by asking what happens to Adorno when he reads Benjamin on Baudelaire, why it is that Benjamin seems to Adorno too obscure, too difficult, too untheoretical. But first, what is the relation between linguistic opacity in James and the question of an ethical relation? Consider what James has to say about judgment, our ability to make it, and the necessary limits of our capacity. We may think that without the capacity to judge we are surely at sea in the realm of ethics, that judgment must anchor us, that judgment is what we must secure.

At the end of *Washington Square* the main character, Catherine, refuses to marry Morris Townsend, the man to whom she was earlier engaged and who left her quite unceremoniously and without good explanation some twenty years before.[2] Catherine's father never believes anyone would want to marry her and believes in particular that Morris wanted to marry her only for her wealth. But she very much wanted to marry dear Morris and wanted as well to believe in the transparency of his words. She believed, as it

were, in the transparency of his authorship, that his words manifested his intentions, and that the words and the intentions were nothing but good. Catherine was not only believing but also obedient, and she refused to marry Morris until and unless she could secure her father's approval. But that approval never comes; it is ferociously withheld, and daughter and father become locked in a battle of wills. In the meantime she keeps Morris waiting, Morris, who turns out not to have a job, not to have a cent, very much in need of her money, to be very much a cad, a smooth cad, one with a wonderful and engaging way with language. Before the father dies, he asks that Catherine promise that she will not marry Morris, even though it has been twenty years, and no one has heard from him. She refuses to promise. More suitors arrive in the interim, and she refuses them all. And then the father does die, and Morris arrives, and he banters, and he appears to mean what he says, and he asks about a future, and she shows him the door, which is her act. And she takes up her embroidery and assumes her solitude for the time that is left to her. Morris can't understand and asks, well, why didn't she get married all this time, assuming she was waiting for him. And we ask, well, if she wasn't going to marry old Morris, why didn't she make the promise to her father? But she didn't, no, she didn't. And everyone thinks they know her; everyone thinks they can predict her. The father dies thinking that she was unwilling to make the promise because she intends to marry Morris. Morris arrives thinking she has been rejecting suitors with the hope of marrying him. But she won't. She won't make that promise, and she will not take that vow. And these refusals, we might say, make her virtually incomprehensible to everyone.

> Morris stood stroking his beard, with a clouded eye. "Why have you never married?" he asked abruptly. "You have had opportunities."
> "I didn't wish to marry."
> "Yes, you are rich, you are free; you had nothing to gain."
> "I had nothing to gain," said Catherine.
> Morris looked vaguely round him, and gave a deep sigh. (218)

She offers him some words in this instance, but he cannot seem to understand them, and he doesn't seem to know what questions to ask of these words in order to gain elucidation. Indeed, she seems to understand that the answer she has to give is one that he will not be able to understand as an answer: "I meant to tell you," she adds, "by my aunt, in answer to your message—if you had waited for an answer—that it was unnecessary for you to come in that hope" (219). She offers him no hope for an answer, and in this moment it is the reader, too, mindful that this is the last page, who is cautioned against hope in this sense. When Morris then says good-bye, he adds, "Excuse my indiscretion," suggesting that he has broken from accepted form

or that her refusal is in some way an indication that he arrived with inappropriate expectations. Her response does not take the form of words but rather an extended silence, as if whatever meaning this refusal has for her will not and cannot appear in speech. The final act between them is one of movements, not words: "He bowed, and she turned away—standing there, averted, with her eyes on the ground, for some moments after she had heard him close the door of the room" (219). As he leaves, he expresses his exasperation to Mrs. Penniman: "She doesn't care a button for me—with her confounded little dry manner." And then he comes up against the enigma of her decision: "But why the deuce, then, would she never marry?" (219). Mrs. Penniman, whose own desire, deflected and sustained through the triangularity of their relations, fears the impending end. Catherine has taken herself out of the circuit, and there is no future if this enigma stays intact, if no fresh explanation can incite more plot. Morris then leaves them both, and the "inadequacy of the explanation" finally stills their conspiracy. "Catherine, meanwhile, in the parlour, picking up her morsel of fancy-work, had seated herself with it again—for life, as it were" (219).

And she does not give her reasons in language. Indeed, this is a moment when language recedes, when handiwork is taken up, when the idioms of the novel cannot approach the final enigma that she is, when what we might be tempted to call her autonomy has no language but takes place, as it were, through marking the limits of all speaking that seeks to bind her, that offers itself to her as a way of binding herself. She performs, we might say, the limits of language and the "inadequacy of explanation" at this instance. The work she takes up "for life, as it were," makes clear that this is a life constituted only metaphorically: the "as it were" closes the story, but the figure retrospectively extends back to the whole story, as if, all along, a figure of speech that does not quite capture the referent has been the story's way of proceeding, only stated explicitly at the end, as a defining and definitive aside. The reader is also left, in a sense, exasperated, cursing, staring. As readers we are effectively asked whether we will judge her, supply her with a motivation, find the language by which to know and capture her, or whether we will affirm what is enigmatic here, what cannot be easily or ever said, what marks the limits of the sayable. And if we cannot join with Morris and the other chatterers to judge her, then perhaps we are asked to understand the limits of judgment and to cease judging, paradoxically, in the name of ethics, to cease judging in a way that assumes we already know in advance what there is to be known.

And this suspension of judgment brings us closer to a different conception of ethics, one that honors what cannot be fully known or captured about the Other. Her action, her nonaction, cannot be easily translated, and this means that she marks the limits of the familiar, the clear, and the common. To honor this moment in which the familiar must become strange or, rather, where it admits the strangeness at its core, this may well be the moment when we come up against the limits of translation, when we undergo what is previously unknown, when we learn something about the limits of our ways of knowing; and in this way we experience as well the anxiety and the promise of what is different, what is possible, what is waiting for us if we do not foreclose it in advance.

So one might think that this brings me back to Adorno's point and that in a way all I have been saying is a support for Adorno's claim about passing through the unfamiliar.[3] Adorno at once helps to articulate this conception of passing through difficulty as part of what is necessary for critical thinking, but he also exemplifies the limits of the very capacity he recommends. When Walter Benjamin sends Adorno in October of 1938 his Baudelaire manuscript, per agreement, to be considered for publication in the journal edited by the Institute for Social Research, Adorno takes some time in responding; and when he does respond, he lets Benjamin know he is "disappointed" (281). Benjamin is living in Paris at the time, in exile from Germany, under a collaborationist government, with little money. He has no other livelihood than the meager payments he receives for his articles; Adorno and others are responsible for keeping Benjamin on the payroll of the institute. Fearful of the Germans entering France, Benjamin is voicing his desperation to Adorno, and indeed writes to Adorno only one year before he is interned in a camp in Nevers. So we might say, and with reason, that there is a certain ethical urgency to Benjamin's situation at the time. He earlier corresponded with Gerschom Scholem to see whether he might emigrate to Palestine, and Scholem suggested to him that it might be difficult, since Benjamin might need to embrace Zionism.[4] And now Benjamin is waiting to see whether the Institute for Social Research will help him, and they do eventually help him, but it is Max Horkheimer who makes sure that the visa is at Marseilles in September of 1940, Horkheimer who could never really read Benjamin, who wanted the journal to go in a different direction: more social theory, more social science. So Benjamin sends his Baudelaire essay to Adorno, and Adorno responds by vacating the position of the "I" and writing as the "we," the editorial board: he writes about "the attitude of all of us to your manuscript" (280):

> motifs are assembled but they are not elaborated (*durchgeführt*). In your cover letter to Max you presented this as your express intention, and I am aware of the ascetic discipline you have imposed on yourself by omitting everywhere the conclusive theoretical answers to the questions involved. . . . Panorama and "traces," the *flâneur* and the arcades, modernity and the ever-same, all this *without* theoretical interpretation—can such "material" as this patiently await interpretation (*geduldig auf Deutung warten kann*) without being consumed (*verzehrt*) in its own aura? (281)

So Adorno's complaint seems to be that Benjamin fails to give an elaboration and that an elaboration, a true elaboration, will be one that qualifies the work as theoretical. Benjamin's writing is allusive, inconclusive, too ascetic, withheld, guilty of ellipsis. It needs to give itself, and to give itself in the form of a theory that renders explicit the meaning of the disparate elements of analysis at hand. What would qualify for Adorno as such a theory? And is this theory as it must be, or is this theory as Adorno wished it to be? We get a better sense of what is required as we continue to read this fateful letter of November 10, 1938. There he writes, for instance, that Benjamin's work belongs to a "realm where history and magic oscillate" (282); that the work is "lacking in one thing: mediation" (282); that Benjamin relates "the pragmatic contents of Baudelaire's work directly and immediately to adjacent features in the social history, and wherever possible, the economic features, of the time" (282). For Adorno, Benjamin fails to relate these aspects of the text and its conditions of production in a way that can be conceptually elaborated; Benjamin offers metaphors for this relation and, Adorno writes: "I am struck by a feeling of artificiality (*Künstlichkeit*) whenever you substitute metaphorical expressions for [obligatory expressions (*verpflichtenden Aussage*)]" (282, my correction). And then he makes clear, without doubt, that for the connection to be authentic, and not artificial, for the relation to be conceptual and elaborated, and not metaphorical and elliptical, it would have to fulfill the requirements of a true materialism: "I regard it as methodologically inappropriate to give conspicuous individual features (*sinnfällige Züge*) from the realm of the superstructure a 'materialist' turn by relating them immediately, and perhaps even causally, to certain corresponding features of the substructure. The materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the *total social process* (*gesamtprozess*)" (283).

So we see that what theory is or, rather, must be is precisely the kind of practice that relates every particular cultural trait to the total social process.[5] But we also understand that Adorno is writing to Benjamin at a time of need, rejecting his piece on Baudelaire, and calling into question his relation to the institute, which supplies his wage at this time and which holds out his last hope for gaining a visa out of collaborationist France. This somehow remains in the background here, even as Adorno apologizes for Horkheimer's failure to respond directly to the essay originally addressed to him, citing "the enormous commitments connected with [Max's] move to Scarsdale" (285).

> The impression which your entire study conveys—and not only to me . . . —is that you have here done violence upon yourself. Your solidarity with the Institute, which pleases no one more than myself, has led you to pay the kind of tributes to Marxism which are appropriate neither to Marxism nor to yourself. Not appropriate to Marxism because the mediation through the entire social process is missing, and because of a superstitious (*abergläublisch*) tendency to attribute to mere material enumeration a power of illumination (*Macht der Erhellung*) which really belongs to theoretical construction alone rather than to purely pragmatic allusions. (284)

And then Adorno truly assumes the mantel for both Marxism and theory, not to mention patron, father, and judge, when he writes:

> I speak not only for myself, unqualified as I am, but also for Horkheimer and the others when I say that we are all convinced that it would not only benefit "your" production if you could elaborate your ideas without recourse to such considerations . . . , but that it would also prove most beneficial to the cause (*am förderlichsten ist*) of dialectical materialism and the theoretical interests represented by the Institute, if you surrendered to your own insights and conclusions without combining them with other ingredients, which you obviously find so distasteful to swallow that I cannot expect anything good to come of it. (284)

The letter concludes by explaining to Benjamin why the work cannot appear in the journal pages as is, and Adorno justifies this decision by claiming that this is "for your own sake and for the sake of Baudelaire" (285).

So maybe it is for Benjamin's sake, or the sake of Baudelaire, but we don't really find Adorno weeping over the cause of Baudelaire in this writing or elsewhere. We do see him clearly laying out the stakes of a dialectical materialism, however, that takes the process of mediation to be central, that thinks the truly theoretical operation is the one that relates the particular to the social totality through this mediation, fully conceptualized, according to norms of conceptualization to which Adorno subscribes. Indeed, Benjamin's refusal to supply the satisfying link between the particular cultural trait, the duty on wine, the stroll of the flaneur, and the total social process seems to be costing him his livelihood at the moment. And perhaps it could be said as well that the subsequent delays on the part of the institute in supplying that visa in time might be due to the lapse in correspondence that followed this rather stunning rejection of Benjamin's work by Adorno. For months follow after this: Benjamin replies in December with an even and laconic response, and Adorno waits until February 1 to reply, offers a lengthy engagement with Benjamin's essay again, and mentions the impending threat of a German invasion, but does not mention the visa. Benjamin writes back on February 23, 1939, and Adorno waits until July to write again. By September Benjamin is interned at Nevers.

If Scholem earlier asked Benjamin to sign on the dotted line to commit himself to Zionism, and linked that to the plausibility of Benjamin emigrating to Palestine, now Adorno invokes not only dialectical materialism but the collective voice of the institute, inducing Benjamin either to join his view or to disavow Marxism altogether. And although Adorno does not deliver an ultimatum to Benjamin, he withholds work and payment and even

delays their correspondence precisely at the moment in which Benjamin's livelihood and life are imperiled. Significantly, Scholem had written Benjamin earlier about the prospects of Benjamin getting a visa to New York, but in the context of that deliberation Scholem lets Benjamin know that he thinks the writing is too obscure, too unintelligible, and that the possibility of getting the necessary support from influential intellectuals in New York is in some way made more difficult because of Benjamin's difficult prose.[6]

You might think that Benjamin would cave in, would simply write what they want, if it would make them all more satisfied, if it would induce them to go to the consulate, get the visa papers in order, make sure he had a way out. But that was not Benjamin's route, and, as you know, he ended up, visa in hand, committing suicide at the Spanish border on the one day when the border was closed in early September of 1940.

In defending his work, Benjamin suggests that theory must risk a certain incoherence, that it must fail to be fully explicit, that it must founder on relations that might be figured, through metaphor, but not captured through conceptual elaboration. "I, too," he rejoins to Adorno,

> regard this as a theory in the strictest sense of the word (*eine Theorie im strengsten Sinne des Wortes*) and my discussion of the *flâneur* culminates in this. This is the place, and the only place in this part [of the text], where the theory comes into its own in undistorted (*unverstellt*) fashion. It breaks like a single ray of light into an artificially darkened chamber. But this ray, broken down (*zerlegt*) prismatically, suffices to give an ideal of the nature of the light whose focus lies in the third part of the book. (290)

Although I cannot take the time here to trace the treatment of the flaneur, it seems important, for our purposes, to see how Benjamin insists on the invocation of metaphor when he makes the claim for "theory in the strictest sense," theory that "comes into its own in undistorted fashion." And the metaphor at work, the metaphor of light, is precisely the central metaphor of truth in Kabbalistic writings.[7] Suffice it to say that Scholem will be no more pleased with Benjamin's appropriation of Kabbalah (see Scholem, *Walter Benjamin and Gerschom Scholem*, 106) than Adorno will be pleased with Benjamin's appropriation of Marxism and that despite the clear relation of need and friendship Benjamin has for both Adorno and Scholem, he will refuse, refuse until death, to satisfy either one of them. Benjamin does a certain violence to Kabbalah, a certain violence to Marxism, yet he insists on both. To Adorno he writes, "If I refuse (*wenn ich mich dort weigerte*) . . . to pass on to other matters beyond the interest of dialectical materialism and the Institute, there was more at stake than solidarity with the Institute or simple fidelity (*blosse Treue*) to dialectical materialism, namely, a solidarity with the experiences (*Erfahrungen*) we have all shared during the last fifteen years" (291). And to the charge that he has done violence to himself, Benjamin continues:

> [I]t is therefore a question of my own [most productive interests (*eigenste produktive Interessen*)] as a writer. I will not deny that these may occasionally do violence to my original interests. There is an antagonism here of which I would not wish to be relieved (*enthoben*) [not even once (*nicht einmal*)] in my dreams. And overcoming (*Bewältigung*) this antagonism constitutes the problem of my study, and that is a problem of construction. I believe that speculation can only begin its inevitably audacious flight with some prospect of success if, instead of donning the waxen wings of esotericism, it seeks its source of strength in construction alone (*statt die wächsernen Schwingen der Esoterik anzulegen ihre Kraftquelle allein in der Konstruktion sucht*). (291, my translation)

Whereas Adorno understands the construction of social reality to be a theoretical elaboration of the mediating structures that relate specific cultural traits to the total social process, Benjamin understands that social reality is riven precisely by the absence of such mediation, an absence that produces an inevitable tension and antagonism, one he would not want to be without and one that has a specific value for him. Esotericism, yes, precisely because the uncanny way in which the pipe, the stroll, the wine tax, the windows relate to each other and to some social totality is not to be grasped, and that ineffability must be figured, relentlessly, through metaphors in which the relation of substitution between terms does not culminate in a mediation between them, in which, rather, a disjunction and irretraversibility is restaged again and again. When Benjamin writes in February of 1939 to Adorno, he makes clear that conceptual elaboration, if there is to be one, if there is to be one of the flaneur in particular, will have to assume a metaphorical form that instates an antagonism that will find no resolution. Satisfaction will not be achieved, not even in one's dreams. He makes clear his version of Marxism when he claims: "the commodity economy arms [the] phantasmagoria of sameness (*des Gleichens*) which simultaneously reveals itself, as an attribute of intoxication, to [become believable as (*begläubigt*)] the central image of illusion" (310, my correction). In making his point clear to Adorno, he writes, "the *flâneur* makes himself thoroughly at home in the world of [saleability (*Käuflichkeit*)]. In this, he even outdoes (*überbietet*) the whore; he takes the abstract concept of the whore for a stroll" (310). Here, quite literally, Benjamin subjects the conceptual to a metaphorical mode of transport. But whereas the translator adds "so to speak" at the end of this line, there is no *"sozusagen"* or any similar marking of the figural status of this claim in the German. There is no "as it were" that marks off the figural dimension from something more objective, more grounded, more conceptual. For Benjamin, as he argues against Adorno's equation of metaphor with artificiality (*Künstlichkeit*), the figural is the means by which the conceptual is fulfilled, and the figure of the strolling whore is a concept that fulfills itself only in another figure (310). If the concept is fulfilled by such figures, the concept ap-

pears to become articulated only through its disarticulation as a figure. Indeed, if for James, Catherine takes up life "as it were," we are asked to understand the life she takes up as a figural one, a life that is as proper to fiction as, say, the life of a fictional character must be. And we are asked at that moment to consider the slide between fiction and life, since there are lives that are lived in the mode of "as it were," resembling something we might call life that carries no quotation marks around it. Benjamin's translator tries this Jamesian move when he supplies the "so to speak" to Benjamin's claim that Baudelaire "takes the abstract concept of the whore for a stroll." Benjamin is insisting here that reality has been transfigured by the commodity, that new forms of animation are possible as a consequence, and that the figure has become literalized in this instant. James's explicit affirmation of the figural status of Catherine's life fails to restore us to a sure distinction between figural and literal. Since we might say that her life is only "as it were" a life because it is a fiction, taking place within one, the uncanniness of the story resides precisely in the positing of a life that can be lived in the mode of the "as it were," one that fiction lets us see but that does not, for that reason, exempt the possibility from life. If Baudelaire is said to "take the abstract concept of the whore for a stroll," then the concept is animated in and by its figural dimensions, and there is no way to separate the two without losing the animation that is, as it were, its very life.

Oh Benjamin, he makes our heads hurt. Why does he torture us so? Must we follow him here, or can we stop following him, tell him, simply, clearly, that he is no longer a Marxist, no longer a Kabbalist, no longer knowable according to the terms by which we have, conventionally, established knowability? Or is he telling us something about what truth has become for us, historically, that it has become a certain difficulty, and that if we are unwilling to be disarmed and to become, suddenly, unknowing, we assume instead a posture of dogmatism that may well sidetrack us from the evanescence, if not the ineffability, of a life?

Notes

1. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978).

2. Henry James, *Washington Square* (New York: Penguin, 1979).

3. See Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). The German text consulted and cited here is *Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Briefwechsel, 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt: Surhkamp, 1994).

4. See Scholem's letter to Benjamin, dated July 26, 1933, in which he remarks, "In our experience, in the long run only those people are able to live here who, despite

all the problems and depressions, feel completely at one with this land and the cause of Judaism" and then counsels Benjamin to "assess the degree of your commitment to Judaism," in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gerschom Scholem, 1932–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem, introduction by Anson Rabinbach (New York: Schocken, 1989), 66.

5. Of course, Adorno makes clear elsewhere that this totality is not given at once but only negatively and in parts that indicate the always vanishing whole.

6. See Scholem's letter to Benjamin, March 25, 1938, regarding how Benjamin is regarded as a "mystic" in New York (Scholem, *Walter Benjamin and Gerschom Scholem*, 215).

7. Benjamin was reading Scholem on Kabbalistic writings (in manuscript form) throughout the 1930s and doubtless had exposure to them before. Kabbalistic writing has centered on the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, a multiauthored text that centers on the theory of divine emanation. This emanation both informs and transcends figures of speech so that words contain and indicate a divine light that precedes them and passes through them. The account of emanation has undergone several forms in the course of Kabbalistic writings. The Safed Mystics, exiled in the early sixteenth century from Spain, included Isaac Luria, who, in Palestine, offered a theology in which "the first divine act was not emanation, but withdrawal." God, deemed Ein Sof, withdrew from this space both to eliminate "harsh judgement" (15) and to subsequently endow the space of withdrawal with the power of light. The light entered this space only to shatter and to produce sparks that became contained as bits of material existence. The Hasidic phrase "raise the sparks" refers to the act of finding the holiness within material reality and, indeed, within letters of the alphabet. See Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 1–19.