

Benjamin and Wittgenstein: Signals and Affinities

Stanley Cavell

The invitation to participate in a small conference on Walter Benjamin at Yale's humanities center meant to assess the appearance of the first volume of Harvard's *Selected Writings* of Benjamin as a measure from which, as the letter of invitation frames things, nonspecialists in Benjamin studies are asked to "evaluate Benjamin's contribution to their respective fields," was irresistible, allowing one to speak from, without quite parading, an ignorance it is otherwise hard to overcome. Whatever the exact perimeter and surface of my field, let us say, of philosophy, judged by the work from which I have made a living for most of a lifetime, it is, and, while partially and restlessly, has wanted to be, territory shared with those who, however different otherwise, acknowledge some affinity with the later Wittgenstein and with J. L. Austin, if just so far as those thinkers are recognizable as inheritors, hence no doubt betrayers, of a tradition of philosophy that definitively includes Frege, Russell, Carnap, and Quine. Seen from that shared territory, an honest answer to the question of Benjamin's actual contribution to the field is that it is roughly nil. But if that were my sole space for an answer, I would not have accepted the prompting to respond to the question.

Two helpful anthologies of writing about Benjamin—one from two or three years ago edited by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne and one from ten years earlier edited by Gary Smith—are explicit in their wish to present Benjamin in his aspect, or should one say semblance, as a philosopher; both are explicit in wishing to counter the dominating semblance of Benjamin as a great critic, as lent to him in the English-

speaking world by Hannah Arendt's portrait and collection under the title *Illuminations*, as they are explicit in recognizing that Benjamin at best created, and aspired to, as Adorno put the matter, "a philosophy directed against philosophy," which they are also prepared to recognize as something that a creative canonical modern philosopher, since I suppose Descartes and Bacon, is rather bound to do.¹ This gesture of a disciplinary or counterdisciplinary appropriation of Benjamin focuses two points of interest for me (I do not suppose them incompatible with those editors' intentions): (1) Benjamin's anti- or counterphilosophy may be seen specifically as immeasurably distant from and close to Wittgenstein's anti- or counterphilosophy in *Philosophical Investigations*; (2) there is an economy of inspiration and opacity in Benjamin's prose—sometimes it is, as Emerson puts things, a play of intuition and tuition—that suggests a reason that the idea of philosophy should not simply replace or succeed that of criticism in coming to terms with his achievement. Benjamin enacts, more or less blatantly, a contesting of the philosophical with the literary, or of what remains of each, that seems internal at once to the exceptional prestige of his work and to an effect of intimacy or concern it elicits from its readers.

A sense of affinity between Benjamin and Wittgenstein helped produce the signals in my subtitle, when, with the memory in my head of Benjamin's frequently cited letter to Scholem (17 April 1931) in which he expresses a phantasm of his writing as a call or signal for rescue from the top of the crumbling mast of a sinking ship,² I came upon a piece of his with the title "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater" containing these sentences: "Almost every child's gesture is command and signal," and "it is the task of the director to rescue the children's signals out of the dangerous magic realm of mere fantasy and to bring them to bear on the material."³ One hardly knows whether Benjamin is there identifying

1. See *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London, 1994); *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago, 1989); and *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969).

2. See Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, 17 Apr. 1931, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, ed. Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Chicago, 1994), p. 378.

3. Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, trans. Don Reneau et al., ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, 1994), p. 233.

Stanley Cavell is the Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and the General Theory of Value (emeritus) at Harvard University. He is the author, most recently, of *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (1996), *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (1995), and *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (1994).

more with the director than with the child, whose world Benjamin of course enters elsewhere as well (apart from his interest in the history of children's books, I cite Jeffrey Mehlman's fascinating *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years*).⁴ And I know of no other major philosophical sensibility of this century who attaches comparable importance to the figure of the child with the exception of Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*, which opens with Augustine's portrait of himself as a child stealing language from his elders, an autobiographical image that haunts every move in Wittgenstein's drive to wrest language back from what he calls metaphysics, and what we might perhaps still call the absolute.⁵

To the extent that opening a path for Benjamin's contribution to my field will be furthered by opening certain passages between his writing and Wittgenstein's *Investigations*—which is the object of these remarks—I have to give an idea of how I have wished to see the *Investigations* received.

My interpretation of that work is as a continuous response to the threat of skepticism, a response that does not deny the truth of skepticism—that we cannot coherently claim with certainty that the world exists and I and others in it—but recasts skepticism's significance in order to throw light upon, let's say, human finitude, above all, representing all, the human achievement of words. I go on to relate the resulting understanding of skepticism to the problematic of knowledge worked out in Shakespearean tragedy, whether in Othello's tortured doubts about Desdemona's faithfulness, or in Macbeth's anxiety about his wife's humanity, or in Lear's presentations of his worthiness for love, or in Hamlet's desire never to have succeeded, or acceded, to existence. Reading tragedy back into philosophical skepticism I would variously, in various connections, characterize the skeptic as craving the emptiness of language, as ridding himself of the responsibilities of meaning, and as being drawn to annihilate externality or otherness, projects I occasionally summarize as seeking to escape the conditions of humanity, which I call the chronic human desire to achieve the inhuman, the monstrous, from above or from below. (I wonder what might, or should, have happened to these ideas had I read earlier than mere months ago Benjamin's frightening portrait of Karl Kraus as a misanthrope and satirist. This is I trust for another time.)⁶ Pursuing the "I" or "we" of the *Investigations* as the modern skeptical subject, I find specific, quite explicit, sketches there of this figure as characterized by fixation, strangeness, torment, sickness, self-destructiveness, perversity, disappointment, and boredom. It was in a seminar I offered three or four years ago on Heidegger and Thoreau, to

4. See Jeffrey Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years* (Chicago, 1993).

5. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3d ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (London, 1958), for example, §47; hereafter abbreviated *PI*.

6. See Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1978), pp. 239–73.

a group of advanced students with whom I could more or less assume my reading of Wittgenstein, upon my saying of *Walden* that it is an exercise in replacing the melancholia of skepticism by a mourning for the world, letting it go, that a student—not of philosophy but of literary studies—blurted out that I must read Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*).

I had years earlier read just the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to the book profitlessly, unprepared to divine its motivations by what I had then read of Benjamin (essentially no more than, to say the banal truth, the essays collected in *Illuminations*), and I put the thing aside, vaguely planning to seek reliable advice and then go back. It is always an issue to determine whose advice or warning you will accept in such matters, and for some reason I allowed myself, after a while, to accept this student's unguarded appeal, with its registering of an unknown affinity. As an example of the results, I shall specify here something of the perspective from which I follow Benjamin's identification of saturnine melancholy as a feature of the mourning play, especially in its theological conception, as *acedia*, “dullness of the heart, or sloth,” which Benjamin counts as the fourth or fifth of the deadly sins, and of which he nominates Hamlet as the greatest modern portrait.⁷

The conjunction of melancholy with, let me call it, ennui or boredom, speaks to one of the guiding forces of Wittgenstein's thoughts in the *Investigations*, the recognition that his mode of philosophizing seems to “destroy everything interesting (all that is great and important)” (*PI*, §118). Wittgenstein voices this recognition explicitly just once (and once more can be taken to imply it [see *PI*, §570]), but it is invoked each time he follows the method of language-games, that is to say, punctually through the bulk of the *Investigations*. That this destruction, as Wittgenstein notes, leaves behind as it were no scene of devastation, no place that has become “only bits of stone and rubble” (*PI*, §118)—everything is left as it is, your world is merely as a whole displaced, transfigured by withdrawing your words from their frozen investments, putting them back into real circulation—suggests that the imaginary destruction of what we called great and important reveals our investments to have been imaginary, with the terribly real implication that so far as philosophy was and is our life (and there is no surveying the extent) our life has been trained as a rescue from boredom, delivered to an anxious twilight of interest.

That Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book can be thus be entered as a study of a peculiar preoccupation with Shakespeare and skepticism is of pressing interest for me. (The baroque date of Benjamin's genre seems roughly to fit, but Benjamin's concept of the baroque, which he ties to the Counter-Reformation, is so far as I know unsettled in its application to the English-

7. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (1977; London, 1985), p. 155; hereafter abbreviated *OG*; see also p. 158.

speaking dispensation. This discrepancy may prove fateful.) Continuing for a moment the theme of melancholy, one may well be struck by the fact that Benjamin's report of the emblems of melancholy, which features the dog, the stone, and the sphere (following Panofsky and Saxl's celebrated work on Dürer), turns out to list figures that all appear in *Philosophical Investigations*.

The dog, possessed classically of a melancholic look and a downward gaze, as toward the center of gravity, appears in the *Investigations* at a moment in which Wittgenstein, in one of his images of human finitude (distinguishing that from animal limitation), remarks, "One can imagine an animal angry, frightened, unhappy, happy, startled. But hopeful? And why not?" The text continues by instancing this nondespairing hopelessness, as it were, of animals as follows: "A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after tomorrow?—And *what* can he not do here?—How do I do it?" Wittgenstein's answer here is to reflect that "the phenomena of hope are modes of [the] complicated form of life [of humans]," a life form he here identifies as of those who can talk, which for him seems essentially to mean, those who can fall into philosophical perplexity (*PI*, p. 174).

The stone appears in an equally fateful path of the *Investigations*' territory, that of our knowledge of pain, of our basis (under the threat of skepticism) of sympathy with the suffering of others. "What gives us *so much as the idea* that living beings, things, can feel anything?" (*PI*, §283). Countering the theory that I transfer the idea from feelings in myself to objects outside, Wittgenstein observes: "I do not transfer my idea to stones, plants, etc. / Couldn't I imagine having frightful pains and turning to stone while they lasted? Well, how do I know, if I shut my eyes, whether I have not turned into a stone? And if that has happened, in what sense will *the stone* have the pains?" The further working out of metamorphosis here is briefly Kafkaesque, and the association of pain with stone has a precedent in the poem of Trakl's ("A Winter's Evening") that Heidegger interprets in his essay entitled "Language."⁸ (Is Wittgenstein's move against a narcissistic diagnosis of our knowledge of suffering not pertinent to a political imagination?)

Of course such considerations would, at best, be responded to as curiosities by more representative members of my field, and at worst, not without proper impatience, as an avoidance or betrayal of philosophy (as if I perversely emphasize the aspect of the *Investigations* that is itself a betrayal of philosophy). And I am not even mentioning Wittgenstein's place for the fly, the beetle, the lion, and the cow. Benjamin's recurrence to animals (as well as to stone and to angels) is a principle theme of Beatrix Hanssen's recent book, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, which op-

8. See Martin Heidegger, "Language," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, ed. J. Glenn Gray (New York, 1975), pp. 194–95.

poses Benjamin's new conception of natural history to, importantly, Heidegger's articulation of Dasein's historicity.⁹ So I might note that I am also not mentioning in connection with Benjamin's new conception of natural history that the concept of natural history occurs significantly also in the *Investigations*, in accounting for our species' ability to attribute concepts to others that imply membership in our species, such as commanding, recounting, chatting, walking, drinking, playing (*PI*, §118) (and, of course, accounting for an inability to exercise this ability in particular cases).

Nor will impatience be stilled as I now list the sphere—understood as the earth, the third of the emblems of melancholy—as appearing among the countless paths along which Wittgenstein tracks the philosophical pressure on words that forces them from their orbits of meaningfulness: “[An] example [is] that of the application of ‘above’ and ‘below’ to the earth. . . . I see well enough that I am on top; the earth is surely beneath me! (And don’t smile at this example. We are indeed all taught at school that it is stupid to talk like that. But it is much easier to bury a problem than to solve it)” (*PI*, §351). (Preoccupied with Benjamin, we should perhaps recall that Brecht, in his *Galileo*, found it of politically revolutionary importance to provide the right explanation for the error of supposing people at the antipodes to be “below” our part of the earth. It is worth considering whether Brecht was in his way a bit burying the problem, I mean the intellectual resources of the Counter-Reformation Church.) Perhaps a more pertinent invocation of the sphere, or its surface—pertinent now to Benjamin's struggle with German idealism—is the following instance of Wittgenstein's unearthing our untiring requirement of the ideal:

Thought is surrounded by a halo.—Its essence, logic, presents an order, in fact the a priori order of the world. . . . We are under the illusion that . . . [this] order is a *super*-order between—so to speak—*super*-concepts. [*PI*, §97]

The conflict [between actual, everyday language and our requirement of the crystalline purity of logic] becomes intolerable; the requirement now threatens to become empty—We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk; so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground! [*PI*, §107]

Where other theorists of melancholy emphasize the relation of the human to earth's gravity, working out the fact of finding ourselves bound or

9. See Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley, 1997).

sunk upon earth, Wittgenstein, the engineer, works out the fate of our capacity to move ourselves upon it, to go on—a different insistence upon the Benjaminian theme of our existence in materiality, our new relation to objects.

Something is right in the exasperation or amusement such considerations may cause those within the tradition of Anglo-American analytical philosophy. One who insisted on such matters as the melancholy or disappointment in the *Investigations*, in the absence of, unresponsive to, the matters it instances in its preface—matters concerning “the concepts of meaning, of understanding, of a proposition, of logic, mathematics, states of consciousness,” along with attention to Wittgenstein’s insistence on the procedures he calls his “methods”—would not be, I would be prepared to join in saying, talking about Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*, p. iv). (Though I am not prepared to identify ahead of time every way responsiveness to such matters can look.) But then why not be content to say that? Why the exasperation? Why *does* Wittgenstein write that way? Couldn’t the occasional animals and the odd flarings of pathos, perverseness, suffocation, lostness, be dropped or ignored and a doctrine survive? Many, most serious scholars of the *Investigations* have felt so, and behaved so.

Benjamin may provide a further fresh start here, from an odd but characteristic place, in his decisive interpretation or illumination of the animals in Kafka’s stories—help specifically in grasping how it is that matters that can readily seem negligible, and which after all occupy so small a fraction of the actual sentences and paragraphs of the text of the *Investigations*, can nevertheless seem to others (who do not deny the presence of the other shore) to contain, as it were, its moral, the heart of the counsel it offers. Kafka’s parables, Benjamin suggests—the old friend of Gershom Scholem’s—“have . . . a similar relation to doctrine as the Aggadah [the nonlegal part of the talmudic and later rabbinic literature] does to the Halakah [the law or doctrine in that literature].” And Benjamin asks:

But do we have the doctrine which Kafka’s parables interpret and which Kafka’s postures and the gestures of his animals clarify? It does not exist; all we can say is that here and there we have an allusion to it. Kafka might have said that these are relics transmitting the doctrine, although we could regard them just as well as precursors preparing the doctrine. In every case it is a question of how life and work are organized in human society.¹⁰

The application to the *Investigations* must be rather topsy-turvy. It is a work that quite explicitly claims not to advance *theses* (see *PI*, §128), a

10. Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” *Illuminations*, p. 122.

claim few of its admirers, I believe, believe. The closest thing to a doctrine I discern in the *Investigations* seems to occur in three short sentences that end its opening paragraph, in which Wittgenstein announces what he calls the roots of the idea of language that he sees in the picture conveyed by the paragraph from Augustine's *Confessions* referred to earlier. The idea Wittgenstein formulates is as follows: "Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands." The 693 ensuing sections of the *Investigations* can be said to discover relics transmitting this doctrine, or precursors preparing the doctrine, ones that show the doctrine—which seems so obvious as to be undeniable, if even noticeable—to come not merely to very little, but to come to nothing, to be empty. Yet it announces in its roots—in every one of the words Augustine employs to express his memory of receiving language—the theory of language as a means of referring to the world and as expressing our desires that every advanced philosophy since Frege and Husserl and the early Russell, up to Heidegger and Benjamin and Lacan and Derrida have in one way or another contended with. Wittgenstein's originality, to my mind, is to show that the doctrine, as reflected in its countless relics, is nothing we believe, that it is its very promise of emptiness that we crave, as if that would be not less than redemption.

Students of Wittgenstein have heard something from me over the years not unlike this skeptical news, or rather this news about skepticism, and have taken it to attribute to Wittgenstein a vision of the end of philosophy, an attribution some deplore and others embrace. It will hardly be of interest to either of these receptions of Wittgenstein to hear that the dismantling of a false redemption is work enough for an ambitious philosophy. But that is in any case not the direction of issue for me at the moment, which is to suggest that if readers of Wittgenstein should be interested in Benjamin that is because readers of Benjamin might find they have an interest in Wittgenstein. And any specific news I have from this direction, as a beginning reader of Benjamin, can only come from testifying to specific interests that I am finding in it, its bearing on the work I do, obvious and devious.

I cite one or two sentences of Benjamin's taken from each of the two most elaborated essays in the first volume of *Selected Writings*: from "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," Benjamin's doctoral dissertation and most extended, I believe, investigation of the concept of criticism; and from the essay, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," containing stretches of Benjamin's most concentrated, I believe, work of concrete, or what used in my circles to be called practical, criticism. (Some, I know, find Benjamin's later work to surpass the earlier. But can it be true, any more than in Wittgenstein's case, that the later *obviates* the earlier?)

Start with the essay on criticism: "The entire art-philosophical project of the early Romantics can . . . be summarized by saying that they

sought to demonstrate in principle the criticizability of the work of art.”¹¹ Part of what this summarizes is the idea of criticism as a sober “continuation” or “consummation” of the work of art; together with the idea that “every critical understanding of an artistic entity is, as reflection in the entity, nothing other than a higher, self-actively originated degree of this entity’s consciousness,” and the corollary idea or “principle of the uncriticizability of inferior work.”¹² That movies—the best even of Hollywood talkies—are as responsive to the pressure of something like the degree of critical unfolding as, say, the texts of Shakespeare, is the explicit basis of my treatment of Hollywood comedies in *Pursuits of Happiness*. It is the thing that book has often and variously had charged against it, often put as my taking these films too seriously. In part the charge is a reflection of the unexplained yet decisive fact of aesthetics in the Anglo-American dispensation of philosophy, that the questions it characteristically addresses to artistic entities neither arise from nor are answered by passages of interpretation of those entities, say as represented in Benjamin’s Goethe essay, as in the following sentences from it:

Is Goethe . . . really closer than Kant or Mozart to the material content of marriage? One would have to deny this roundly if, in the wake of all the literary scholarship on Goethe, one were seriously determined to take Mittler’s words on this subject as the writer’s own. . . . After all, [Goethe] did not want, like [his character] Mittler, to establish a foundation for marriage but wished, rather, to show the forces that arise from its decay. . . . [In] truth, marriage is never justified in law (that is, as an institution) but is justified solely as an expression of continuance in love, which by nature seeks this expression sooner in death than in life.¹³

This view of the justification of marriage unnervingly resembles the view taken in my articulation of Hollywood remarriage comedies in *Pursuits of Happiness*, namely, that marriage is justified not by law (secular or religious, nor in particular, to cite a more lurid connection with *Elective Affinities*, by the presence of a child) but alone by the will to remarriage. That articulation, however, denies Benjamin’s rider, which proposes that continuance in love seeks its expression sooner in death than in life (perhaps Benjamin means this as a smack at a romantic suggestion that it is easier to love eternally than diurnally). This is to say that the remarriage narratives I isolate as among the best classical Hollywood talkies (the ones best

11. Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” trans. David Lachterman, Howard Eiland, and Ian Belfour, *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 179.

12. Ibid., pp. 152, 159.

13. Benjamin, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” trans. Stanley Corngold, *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, pp. 300, 301.

able to bear up under what I call philosophical criticism) locate the idea in a comic form, one to define which I find to require, for example, a concept of repetition grounded in Kierkegaard's and in Nietzsche's ideas of repetition and of recurrence; a concept of the relation of appearances to things-in-themselves that challenges Kant's curtaining between them; a concept of attraction or magnetism that does not depend upon beauty; and a theory of morality that requires a working out of Emersonian perfectionism in its differences with the reigning academic forms of moral theory, deontological or Kantian, and teleological or Utilitarian. I would like to claim that this represents on my part a struggle, in Benjamin's perception, "to ascertain the place of a work or a form in terms of the history of philosophy," something Benjamin implies is his project in the *Trauerspiel* book (OG, p. 105).

I hope to get further into a discussion of this claim with Benjamin's writing more than with any other, but I anticipate trouble from the outset. For his inescapable essay of a few years later, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in its sense of the invention of photography and of film as perhaps having "transformed the entire nature of art," does not seek confirmation for this sense of film by means of the criticism of individual films, nor does it suggest that film (some films) can be read as containing the idea that philosophical criticism is to consummate. (Of course not, if the consequence of this transformation is that we no longer possess a developing concept of art, that [in Wittgensteinian terms] nothing any longer plays this role in our form of life.) It would be worth knowing more surely (I seem to persist in counting on some reasonably positive answer) whether film, for example, within the trauma of its role in transforming our ideas of the authorship and the audience and the work of the work of art, has mysteriously maintained, in something like the proportion of instances one would expect in any of the arts in the modern period, the definitive power of art to suffer philosophical criticism; and if film, then perhaps postfilm.

Supposing for the moment that an interest in Wittgenstein's work taken from the perspective of Benjamin's would lead to contributions of Benjamin to something like my field, or to modifying the field, I ask in drawing to a close, more specifically, what the profit or amplification might be for Benjamin's projects. I cite moments from two projects that seem to me to cry out for consideration within and against a Wittgensteinian development, that is, for subjection to the exposure of mutual translation.

First from "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man": "The enslavement of language in prattle is joined by the enslavement of things in folly almost as its inevitable consequence."¹⁴ This is an early reflection of Benjamin's insight into the language of the bourgeois for

14. Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," trans. Jephcott, *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, p. 72.

which Scholem (in the letter I alluded to earlier) praises him as he rebukes him for disfiguring his metaphysics of language by claiming its relation to dialectical materialism. Benjamin responds by recognizing a necessary intellectual risk here, but what were his options in theorizing the Kierkegaardian/Heideggerean theme of prattle? Evidently he does not wish to endorse either Kierkegaard's Christianity or Heidegger's own mode of explicating Dasein's thrownness and falling, which would mean in effect accepting his articulation of life in the crowded everyday. Has he an account of what language is such that it *can* corrupt itself?

Here is a great theme of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, an essential feature of which (in which Austin's work adjoins Wittgenstein's) is the investigation of thinking's internal relation to nonsense, an investigation of course related to logical positivism's obsession with meaninglessness, but radically and specifically opposed to its mode of accounting for it. (I do not know how far one may go in taking the interest in nonsense to be definitive of what came to be called analytical philosophy, an interest that fruitfully differentiates it from its estranged sibling, called Continental metaphysics.) Naturally a philosophical attention to the essential possibility of nonsense in human speech can be taken to avoid Benjamin's concern with a historically specific source of human violation, say that of late capitalism. But what is the theory (of history? of philosophy? of nature?) according to which it must be so taken? And what of the possibility that an attention to history is used to avoid the glare of philosophy?¹⁵

The second, related project is announced in "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

The themes which monastic discipline assigned to friars for meditation were designed to turn them from the world and its affairs. The thoughts we are developing here originate from similar considerations. . . . Our consideration . . . seeks to convey an idea of the high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the thinking to which these politicians [traitors to the cause of anti-Fascism] continue to adhere [or, as he goes on to say, to conform].¹⁶

Here I appeal to my various efforts to show Wittgenstein's and Austin's differently cast attentions to the ordinary as underwritten in the work

15. Winfried Menninghaus, who organized the Yale conference, commented to me after my talk that Benjamin was in fact interested in nonsense, construing (if I understood) the freedom from sense in fairy tales as a rescue from the dictation of sense in myth. I am not prepared now to speak to this. Nor can I now derive the tuition from a theme from the *Trauerspiel* book that to my ear captures the intuition in my tendency to characterize the skeptic as wishing to escape the responsibility for meaning his words; I refer to Benjamin's claim that, in the baroque antithesis of sound and meaning, "meaning is encountered, and will continue to be encountered as the reason for mournfulness" (*OG*, p. 209).

16. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, p. 258.

of Emerson and of Thoreau, and I note the presence of the concept of conformity, an Emersonian master-tone, in aversion to which, as aversion to which, he defines thinking. The language of conformity in his society presents itself to Emerson's ears as sounds from which he finds himself continually shrinking ("Every word they say chagrins us")¹⁷ and which he interprets as an expression of depression—Thoreau famously characterizes (early in *Walden*) the lives of the mass of people as ones of quiet desperation; Emerson had explicitly said "secret melancholy" (in "New England Reformers").¹⁸ Thoreau's invention and demonstration of civil disobedience registers the knowledge that massive depression has, whatever else, a political basis. Specifically, it interprets the emergence of consent as a political phenomenon to signal the recognition that I must acknowledge my voice as lent to, hence as in complicity with, the injustice in my society, hence recognize that I become inexpressive, stifled, in the face of it. Pathos is one response to this knowledge, and who is capable, from time to time, of grander semblances of pathos than Benjamin (as at the close of the Goethe essay)?: "Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope."¹⁹ Here is the point at which to assess Emerson's violent efforts at cheerfulness, at raising up the hearts of his neighbors, which so grates on intellectual ears.

I suppose that this Emersonian note is a sound of hope in democracy, a kind of cost of participation in it. Emerson's formidable essay "Experience" enacts a relentless demand for attaining, or for mourning the passing of, one's own experience—adjoining signature themes of Benjamin's—an enactment through a process of judging the world that Emerson names thinking, something he also calls patience, by which he says we shall "win at the last."²⁰ I might take that formula in Emerson's dialect to suggest, "ween at the last," *ween* meaning to think something possible, as though realization is a function of active expectation now. (As in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*: "Ween you of better luck . . . than your Master, / Whose minister you are?")²¹ And is it sure that Emerson's affirmation is too American a proposition, asking too much of that old part of us so fascinated by the necessity and the freedom of being uncomprehended? Except of course by children.

17. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York, 1983), p. 264.

18. Emerson, "New England Reformers," *Essays and Lectures*, p. 600.

19. Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," p. 356.

20. Emerson, "Experience," *Essays and Lectures*, p. 492.

21. William Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston, 1974), 5.1.135–37, p. 1011.