

“FALLING OUT OF ONE’S ROLE WITH ART” SAMUEL WEBER ON *BENJAMIN’S -ABILITIES*

Interview by Arne De Boever and Alex Murray

Parrhesia Could you briefly explain what you mean by “Benjamin’s -abilities”?

Samuel Weber From his earliest until his latest writings, Walter Benjamin tends to form many of his key concepts by nominalizing verbs through the addition of the suffix “-ability”: in German, “-barkeit.” Examples are: communicability (with respect to language), criticizability (with respect to the Romantic notion of literature), translatability, reproducibility and cognizability. This gives a very particular cast to his manner of forming concepts: instead of seeking to designate what phenomena or processes have in common, such “-abilities” designate what Derrida once called a “structural possibility,” a potentiality based not on what actually is but on what might be. Such concepts are thereby directed more toward a possible future than an already existing present. They put the emphasis therefore on the potential to transform reality – or on reality itself as a process of transformation. But they also reflect what I call a tendency to grasp such reality in terms of “media” or “mediality” – one could say “medi-ability” if it weren’t such an ugly word – rather than in terms of accomplished “works.” A medium, for Benjamin at least, is defined as a complex of relationships – today we might say “links” – rather than as an aggregate of self-contained, meaningful works or facts. Part of my project, in this book, is to retrace the genealogy of Benjamin’s influential insights in the new media back to his relation to the traditional disciplines in which he was initially trained: philosophy, literary studies, art history, political theory. His tendency to “medialize” concepts through articulating them as “-abilities” prepares the way for his insights into the “new” media of photography, cinema and radio. But these insights are always dependent on the way he conceives of the “old” media, above all language, time and space.

P If Benjamin’s and Derrida’s thought can be said to share a concern with language, time, and space, in what ways do you consider them to be different? Perhaps we can begin with language, more specifically linguistics. In a short text you wrote about Benjamin’s -abilities, you present Benjamin as a precursor of Derrida’s rediscovery of Ferdinand de Saussure’s notion of linguistic value as differential signification; but isn’t Benjamin’s background in linguistics different from Derrida’s, in a way that might resist the relation between Benjamin and Derrida that you establish?

SW Your question, which is multiple, is one that has pursued me – Derrida would have said “haunted” – for many years. Where to start? With language perhaps. Both Benjamin and Derrida are in a tradition that also includes Heidegger, and in which language plays a decisive role as the medium within which established notions of meaning and value based on an unquestioned subject-object paradigm are to be rethought. A clear manifestation of this situation can be found in the fact that both Heidegger and Benjamin, independently of one another, planned to write their “Habilitation” – i.e. the second thesis, corresponding to the *Doctorat d’Etat* in

France – on the very same text: *De modi significandi*, at the time ascribed to Duns Scotus and since reattributed to Thomas of Erfurt. In short, the scholastic tradition of investigating the “modes of signifying” served already at the beginning of the twentieth century as an historical point from which the then dominant Neo-Kantianism, and above all *Bewusstseinsphilosophie* – philosophy based on self-consciousness – could be called into question. One of Derrida’s first major works returns to this general configuration in problematizing Husserl’s early attempt to establish an immanence of thinking by demonstrating how the sign and signification have to be excluded in order for such immanence to function, but also how such exclusion breaks down and ultimately confirms the inevitable heterogeneity of thinking, precisely as inseparable from language as signifying process.

Both Derrida and Benjamin participate in this process, which is why both are attentive to language not just as an object of reflection but as a medium of their practice – of their writing practice. So of course Benjamin’s “background in linguistics” is different from Derrida’s, but there are certain common origins and above all concerns that they share. Moreover, for both, the question of the alterity of language as signification also requires a rethinking of the relation of knowledge and truth in their relation not just to science and reason, but also to religion. Both see language as a medium that opens or reopens the question of the “messianic” for instance, with and against an Enlightenment tradition that sought to eliminate or devalue such perspectives.

But here perhaps is a place where a decisive difference between the two, between Benjamin and Derrida, can be found. For Benjamin, the messianic tradition is inseparable from the figure of the Messiah, no matter how elusive and unorthodox this figure turns out to be in his writings. Derrida, by contrast, coins the formula “messianicity without messianism” and his writings rarely make mention of “the Messiah” using the definite article. This difference points up a corresponding divergence in their two styles of thought. Derrida’s deconstructive writing – and not all of his writing is deconstructive, I should add – is inseparable from a powerful force of *formalization*. For instance, Husserl in the *Logical Investigations* appeals to a process of repetition in order to distinguish what he takes to be a self-contained, immanent “ideality of meaning” from all empiricity: as “ideal” a meaning must be identically repeatable in a way that no empirical object can ever be. Derrida by contrast insists that the very notion of repetition, and not just its empirical usage, entails alteration as well as sameness, and that therefore the very process that Husserl cites in order to establish ideality as self-sameness unhinges such self-identity. Repetition thus turns out to be at the heart of Derrida’s deconstructive operation, and it involves on the one hand a process of formalization: something is repeated in order to produce the same, independent of variations in content – and on the other a demonstration that all such formal recurrence inevitably entails alteration, i.e. “signifies” something other than what it “represents.” “Messianicity” in his writing is thus tied to notions such as “promise,” “expectation” but without there being an identifiable object to stabilize their movement. Previous to devising the formula “messianicity without messianism,” Derrida had invoked a phrase first introduced to my knowledge by Hélène Cixous, namely “arrivant,” to designate a process of “arriving” that never reaches its goal, is never fully self-present, nor even necessarily “human”: “arrivant” could also in certain cases be translated as “arrival.”

Benjamin, by contrast, does not proceed by a process of formalization, i.e. of radicalizing a process by which things seek to come into their own and establish their self-sameness. Instead, he tends to prefer to interrupt the process often by introducing “images” – which he uses as what he sometimes calls *Schriftbilder*, script-images, as I would translate it. These images do not illustrate; rather, they interrupt the expectation of what one might expect to “follow” from what has come before and offer puzzling connections that have to be deciphered by the reader. An example is furnished by one of Benjamin’s most famous, but also most elusive figures, that of the “aura,” a word to which he attaches a series of quite different meanings, whose common ground is anything but self-evident: *étui* (velvet-lined boxes for objects or commodities), unreciprocated glance, proximate distance etc. Both Benjamin and Derrida are thus situated in a certain Kierkegaardian tradition, for which the singularity of existence remains an aporetic but untranscendable touchstone, but they relate to that singularity in different ways. Benjamin has no compunction about figuration, as long as such figuration – he calls it also *Darstellung*, staging or exposition – remains enigmatic and thought-provoking. And thus he has no problem referring to “the Messiah” at various points in his writing. Derrida, by contrast, sees the singular itself as entirely aporetic,

which leads him to problematize the “one” – which in French as in German, but unlike English, can serve either as a numerical marker or as an indefinite article. And for Derrida, the indefinite article is rarely figured as an “image” as it often is for Benjamin. Rather it functions to dislocate the unity of words and names, and in this sense remains more intralinguistic.

P How do you see translation’s place within this constellation? Translation, and specifically Benjamin’s notion of translatability, plays an important part in your book. Understanding translation philosophically, one could consider Benjamin’s particular way of forming concepts through the suffix “–ability” as a *practice of translation* – a practice through which he rewrites different verbs such as “mitteilen” (communicating, parting with), “bestimmen” (determine), “kritisieren” (criticize), “zitieren” (cite), “übersetzen” (translate), “reproduzieren” (reproduce), “erkennen” (know), into the same *form*, namely that of “–ability.” Does this form erase a difference between the very different practices that these verbs refer to?

SW You’re absolutely right: translation, or rather “translatability” is decisive for both Benjamin and Derrida. The obvious difference is that Benjamin, at least in the early twenties, when he writes “The Task of the Translator,” sees “translatability” – and indeed all of his –abilities – as entailing a transcendent moment that for him implies a monotheistic reference: “pure language” – whereas Derrida insists on the “aporetic” aspect of translation, such that “translatability” always involves “untranslatability” as well. Benjamin describes the relation of translation to “original” in terms of a certain contact – a *Berührung* – which in turn implies a certain fixity of the two elements involved. Translation, he writes, has the “task of ripening the seed of pure language,” the poetic original is said to reside in “the thick mountainous forest of language,” and perhaps above all, it is described in terms of the “unity of fruit and skin” as opposed to the translation, which “envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds.” Whereas Derrida is more comfortable with the aporetic dynamic of translation: translation of the untranslatable, Benjamin, one could say, “acts out” such aporeticity: for instance in insisting that the original – or something in it – remains “untouched” or even “untouchable” (*unberührbar*) in the process of translation, while at the same time, as I’ve said, describing the process in terms of the “touch” (*Berührung*) of a circle (the original) by a tangent (the translation) in the process then of removing itself from that original. I don’t think, for instance, that Derrida would ever think of an “original” as being a circle, much less of the work of the poet as being “naive, primary, direct,” as Benjamin writes. Both share the sense of translation as a process that antedates and surpasses meaning, as involving what Benjamin calls the “way of meaning” rather than “the meant” and what we today might call a “signifying process.” And both share the sense that this signifying process, far from being only linguistic in the restricted sense, involves the way in which human beings experience the relation of life to death. Derrida’s notion of “survivre” is anticipated by Benjamin’s description of translation as an *Über- or Fortleben*: a living-on (or away). And both see this relationship as somehow culminating in a certain notion of the “messianic.” But whereas for Derrida this notion remains tortured and problematic: “messianicity without messianism,” “desert in the desert,” Benjamin seems (still?) able to appeal to a less broken concept of the messianic – perhaps because he can still see the world in terms of Creation, however fallen, shattered or problematic. Which is why, at the end of his essay, he can compare the “task of the translator” with that of producing an interlinear version of a “sacred text.” I don’t think that for Derrida the notion of “text” would be compatible with that of the “sacred” – although even there one would probably have to introduce many nuances.

P Perhaps another way to think about –ability’s relation to difference could be through the lens of time. The –abilities you discuss in your book are drawn from texts written in between 1916 and 1935. Do you see Benjamin’s –abilities change through time? Continuing our comparative discussion of Benjamin and Derrida, do you see a relation between Benjamin’s –abilities and Derrida’s notion of “iterability”?

SW Let me start with your last question, which will enable me to continue the previous one. For Derrida, “iterability” inserts alterity at the core of all identity, rendering it tendentially – virtually – unstable, because heterogeneous. This includes traditional monotheism, and above all the use of the noun “God” as anything like a proper name. With Benjamin we don’t find that scruple – that reticence. In his essay on “The Work of

Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility,” he begins by acknowledging that repetition has always affected the production of art-works, but then goes on to suggest that something radically new sets in with modern technologies of reproduction, such as film and photography. Derrida would not deny that, but he wouldn't frame it in the same way as does Benjamin, which I see as analogous to his argument in “The Task of the Translator,” namely conserving a notion of the “original” as somehow self-identical, “circular,” in order then to historicize it in a way that strikes me as not entirely thought out. The original remains untouched and in some sense immortal, but it also “lives on” in the highly mortal (because untranslatable) form of the translation. I doubt for instance that Derrida would have endorsed Benjamin's notion that translations, as opposed to originals, are themselves not translatable. Rather he would have examined the ambiguity of the word “translation” rather than identifying its various conflicting meanings with different “forms” or formal possibilities (“abilities”).

This response already addresses the first question or questions, at least implicitly, by suggesting that Benjamin's argumentation does not vary conceptually from “The Task of the Translator” to “The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility.” Which does not mean nothing changes – it's obvious and explicit that Benjamin in his later texts, such as “The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility” directly rejects some of his earlier categories: “symbolic,” “creator,” etc. Of course, when you look at the texts more closely, or think about them more precisely, you discover that the earlier uses of the terms sought to exclude them from the domain of aesthetics; but at the same time they framed that domain. I think the tension in Benjamin's own position comes out in the violent polemics with which he introduces his chapter on “Symbol and Allegory” in the third section of his book on the *Trauerspiel*: he writes of a “usurper” having come to dominate the “philosophy of art” ever since the Romantics: the “usurpation” consists in the translation of the symbolic – which for Benjamin must remain not just transcendental but transcendent, but in the sense of divine, or rather messianic – into the profane domain of art. His construction of the notion of “allegory” is his response to that usurpation, but it too is ultimately informed by the messianic perspective of divine redemption, as he makes clear in his astonishing conclusion – a true *deus ex machina*, albeit in the realm of critical discourse.

P Some of the chapters of the book, for example “Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt,” were written more than ten years ago. What is at stake for you in publishing a book on Benjamin's –abilities today?

SW Benjamin's radicalization of the notion of “exception” helps to explain his tendency to formulate concepts in terms of their “-ability” rather than in terms of their self-presence or self-identity. Especially given the fact that Benjamin acknowledges his debt to Schmitt in the *Trauerspiel* book, it is important to stress precisely how and where he diverges from the thinker who was to write *The Concept of the Political*. Epistemologically, Schmitt aims at providing a conceptual basis for political theory, however ambiguous that basis was to be. Benjamin, on the other hand, extends the notion of “exception” to include the crucial concept of “decision” itself, and thereby paves the way for Derrida's rethinking of that notion in his later writings. Derrida's penchant for phrases such as “decision, if there is ever such a thing” is staged by Benjamin with respect to the Baroque Sovereign, who is incapable of making or taking or implementing the decision that he is called upon to make. This goes to the heart of the notion of authority, which Schmitt still seeks to construe following a theological model, however refracted and mediated, whereas Benjamin questions the very notion of sovereignty itself – for instance in foregrounding the figure of the “intriguer” or “plotter” in Baroque theater. “Taking Exception to Decision” situates In-decision or as Derrida will go on to call it, undecidability, at the very origin of Western modernity, and thus casts a very different light on the Cartesian project that dominates philosophy until today: that of establishing sure and certain foundations for knowledge. At the same time the Schmittian perspective suggests that this project, despite or because of its “secular” character, responds to concerns that have been molded by a long, very long religious tradition. In this perspective it is less surprising that today we are witnessing a “return” of religious concerns and organizations – for after all, in our secular modernity they were never really gone, just underground.

P Yes. We were also thinking about this along slightly different but not unrelated political lines, which could take us back to one of your recent books, *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking*. What is the relation of Benjamin's -abilities to power? If targeting is an ability of power, is -ability also a target of power in the age of bio-political security?

SW Benjamin's "-abilities" entail the question of power, but in a way that invites us to rethink just what it is that this word is supposed to mean. Generally, "power" is understood either in terms of compulsion and constraint, or in terms of accomplishment. In both cases teleologically and ultimately also subjectively – as a function of the will. The will in turn is a form of intentional activity: the capacity to implement the concepts, representations or ideas that one has formed. Benjamin, on the other hand, stands in a tradition that I would call post-Nietzschean: "post" here in the sense of a reading of Nietzsche that emphasizes the aporetic-paradoxical structure of his own "will to power" as "eternal return." For Nietzsche, the "weak" – powerless – have triumphed in Western history. That all by itself should be enough to have initiated a reflection on the non-self-identity of the concept of "power" – or even of "will" to it. The reason that there is a "will to power" is that power is already something that cannot simply be "had" as such: hence it must become the object of a "will" that – if one reads Nietzsche closely enough – is as much a movement "away" from something as "toward" something else. In short, "power" is already in itself ambivalent, and by no means excludes anxiety, desire and other such dynamics. Benjamin, I believe, is squarely in this tradition – one that is continued in our time by Derrida, and which stresses *la force de faiblesse* and *la faiblesse de force*.

And of course recent political developments, the policy of the current Bush administration, demonstrates this all too clearly. The "war against terror" is an acknowledgement that what one is fighting is "terror" – anxiety, fear, trauma – and not any "object." The struggle goes on within a system of subjectivity that seeks to safeguard its sovereignty and demonstrates thereby its increasing dependence and heteronomy. Benjamin's -abilities are his effort to conceptualize such ambivalence: "The Task of the Translator" – since we have been discussing that text, and since it is central to all of Benjamin's work – is determined by an "-ability": the capacity of a text to be translated, that is not measurable in terms of its realizability, that is its being made self-present, being accomplished, but rather in terms of the intensity of the *demand – Forderung* is Benjamin's word – that it places on the reader, that is on those who encounter it, who "graze" it as the translation is said to "touch" the original at one single point before going off on its own tangent. It is this "spin" that marks "power" in the light of its -ability to alter itself, to trace a path of alteration. And this limits our "ability" to "control" it. Power as the inevitability (another -ability!) and limitation of what today is called "spin-control."

P If the "state of exception" is certainly one space within which these questions of power are being played out, would you say that for example the "Streets, Squares, Theatres" you discuss in one of the chapters provide a counter-space to the abuses of power that it brings?

SW Yes – because the kind of spaces Benjamin is describing in those texts from the "Passages" are not a "state," even of exception: they are, as I suggest, "on the move" and also are out-of-the-way places, off the main drag of history: the history of nation-states and of their "exceptions." A state of exception is still a state. Very different from a "stage" in both the theatrical and the temporal senses. Benjamin describes how little shacks are dismantled and recur in other places (of Paris, for instance), they are something like that *Wanderbühne* – that traveling stage that accompanies the baroque court theaters but has no fixed place. This, I think, is why Benjamin throughout his life is fascinated by theater, whether baroque mourning-play or Brechtian epic theater, or even the "natural theater of Oklahoma" in Kafka's *The Man Who Disappeared*. The theatrical stage is always local, but never stable: it always communicates with other spaces and places and is never simply self-identical. It is a space of transformation, of repetition, in which actors take their "cues" from others and "fall out of their roles with art." In theater, as Benjamin sees it, art is always the art of transposition, never of self-contained form. I would say that theater figures not so much a "counter-space" – which as "counter" would still be the mirror-image of that which it counters – but rather alternative spacings, in which place is always on the move and interacting with other places in a space that is therefore discontinuous and above all, heterogeneous: which

is to say, temporal, just as time is always spaced-out in the succession of stages. An alternative to what? one might ask: perhaps to “history,” at least understood conventionally as a process of self-fulfillment. Although I don’t think Benjamin himself would have said that, the figures of theatrical space in his writing allow us to think it.

P Do you consider your own book to be such a stage – to provide such an alternative spacing, in the sense that it ultimately theorizes what you call a “power of conceptualization” that does not so much gain mastery over as draw out the singularity of Benjamin’s –abilities? Does the attempt to read Benjamin conceptually require one to “fall out of one’s role with art” and enter into the limits of conceptualization?

SW To answer the first questions, or parts of your question: I hope so! *Benjamin’s –abilities* is anything but a systematic or comprehensive study – assuming such a thing would be possible or useful in regard to Benjamin. Rather, by pointing to the ways in which Benjamin’s writings and thinking is really impossible to classify or situate in terms of traditional academic disciplines: philosophy, literary criticism, theology – the book seeks to open up new ways of approaching this very difficult and challenging writer. I also see certain implications for the understanding of the relation of “media” to traditional as well as contemporary areas of study. In Benjamin’s work “media” names a way of approaching art, literature but also language and thinking that is quite different from the more familiar and established perspectives. “Medial” designates something that has no absolute beginning but is “originary” in the sense discussed already: i.e. as a process of transformative reinscription.

With regard to the second part of your question: without wanting to suggest that there is only one way of reading Benjamin, “falling out of one’s role with art” does strike me as a helpful indication of the singular sort of approach that his very singular sort of writing encourages – and responds to. Art, in this sense, far from being defined as the construction of works – as a process of “erecting” or building – would involve rather inventive ways of “falling” – a very different kind of “fortunate fall” than that with which we are familiar. Different... and yet perhaps also not entirely unrelated either. But I am reminded rather of the way in which Benjamin describes the flight of the “seagulls” following the ship on which he finds himself, in the sketch of the same name – “Seagulls” – which is so diverse and varied and unpredictable that the very name “seagulls” “falls away” from the birds he is watching. To learn how to make that fall the driving force of a “flight” that neither simply flees nor flies – that strikes me as the ultimate challenge of Benjamin’s -abilities.

P Thank you very much for this interview.

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