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Benjamin's Ecologue: Language and Environmental Trauma in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

Walter Benjamin's theory of language has ecocritical implications. His panlogue, the idea that everything speaks, includes an ecologue—an understanding of natural environments based on the stories of exploitation they communicate. Benjamin's ecologue questions the supremacy attached to the uniqueness and superiority of human language. At the same time, it preserves the task of human language to turn the wounds of the past into political narratives that interrupt the cycle of environmental destruction. This article examines Benjamin's theory of language from an ecological perspective, discussing the objection of anthropomorphism, the sadness and mourning of nature, and the pedagogical impulse of a weak ecological power in Benjamin's political historiography.

Keywords: Ecology. Pedagogy. Benjamin, Walter.

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Resumo

Benjamin Ecólogo: Linguagem e Trauma Ambiental no Antropoceno

A teoria da linguagem de Walter Benjamin tem implicações ecocríticas. Sua proposta, segundo a qual tudo fala, inclui uma dimensão ecológica - uma compreensão dos ambientes naturais com base nas histórias de exploração que eles comunicam. O ecólogo de Benjamin questiona a supremacia ligada à singularidade e superioridade da linguagem humana. Ao mesmo tempo, preserva a tarefa da linguagem humana de transformar as feridas do passado em narrativas políticas que interrompam o ciclo de destruição ambiental. Este artigo examina a teoria da linguagem de Benjamin de uma perspectiva ecológica, discutindo a objeção ao antropomorfismo, a tristeza e o luto da natureza e o impulso pedagógico de um poder ecológico frágil na historiografia política de Benjamin.

Palavras-chave: Ecologia. Pedagogia. Walter Benjamin.

Zusammenfassung

Benjamins Ökologie: Sprach- und Umwelttraumata im Anthropozän

Walter Benjamins Sprachtheorie hat ökokritische Implikationen. Sein Panlog, die Idee, dass alles spricht, beinhaltet einen Ökolog: ein Verständnis der Umwelt, basierend auf den Geschichten der Ausbeutung, die sie über sich selbst berichtet. Benjamins Ökolog stellt die Vorherrschaft infrage, die an der Einzigartigkeit und Überlegenheit der menschlichen Sprache haftet. Zugleich bewahrt er die Aufgabe der menschlichen Sprache, die Wunden der Vergangenheit in politische Narrative zu verwandeln, die die Kontinuität der ökologischen Zerstörung unterbrechen. Dieser Artikel untersucht Benjamins Sprachtheorie aus einer ökologischen Perspektive, von dem Vorwurf des Anthropomorphismus über die Traurigkeit und Trauer der Natur bis zu dem pädagogischen Impuls einer schwachen ökologischen Kraft in Benjamins politischer Geschichtsschreibung.

Schlüsselwörter: Ökologie. Pädagogik. Benjamin, Walter.

For Walter Benjamin, everything spoke. The stone, the fox, and the lamp no less than human beings, angels, and gods. Benjamin's "panlogue," as Jacques Derrida and Peter Fenves called it, has consequences for environmental humanities (FENVES, 2011). The idea that everything speaks is inspired by romantic animism combined with G.W. Leibniz's monadology, according to which, as Joseph von Eichendorff wrote, a song is dormant in all things around. These songs are not merely the poetic raptures of starry nights, but often the echoes of violent extraction and exploitation (SMITH, 2001). Along with their unique languages, environments have their traumas. If they would be endowed with language, Benjamin suggests, they would lament. Nature's muteness, however, is not the sign of sadness—that would reduce its language to an instrument of expression. Rather, nature's sadness makes landscapes, forests, and mountains mute—a sadness that is the result of nature's exclusion from the realm of human conversation and communication.

This article examines the contribution of Benjamin's theory of language to critical ecology and environmental thought. At the heart of this theory is the unprecedented attempt to put the experience and expression of all beings, human and non-human, on the same plane. This attempt has earned Benjamin the epithet of a mystic (SMITH, 2016). From an ecocritical point of view, however, it is difficult to ignore Benjamin's insistence that humanity's subjugation of everything non-human results first and foremost from the teleological reduction of language to an instrument.

The following sections propose an ecocritical interpretation of Benjamin's theory of language. I argue that Benjamin's endowment of nature with language is not a traditional prosopopeia that lends voices to non-human beings, but a way of granting all entities their unique ways of appearance and expression, regardless of any human measure of comprehensibility. While environmental languages might be largely incomprehensible, the part of their expression that humans can perceive and understand creates the task of including them in a larger sphere of discourse and communication.

The first section examines the claim that environments have languages in view of the objection of anthropomorphism, focusing on the notion of the ecologue and the concept of aura. The second and third sections take a closer look at the early reflections on language (1916–1925) as a theory of environmental narration, specifically the idea of nature's sadness and its way of mourning. The final section traces key connections between Benjamin's theory of language and his philosophy of history, in which environmental narration operates as a *weak* ecological power.

Anthropomorphism and Environmental Languages

The idea that everything speaks is easily dismissed as anthropomorphism—as the transposition of an essentially human trait or form onto the non-human world. Dismissing Benjamin's panlogue as anthropomorphism implies that, literary fantasies aside, only humans and perhaps a few animals speak. According to the traditional view, if humans claim that non-human beings have languages, they in fact subjugate them once again by imposing their own ways of navigating the world. Benjamin's contribution

to critical ecology consists in his defense of a cosmic prosopopoeia that grants things their languages to reduce human supremacy. Rejecting as mysticism the proposal that every being and entity, not only humans and animals, have the ability to express their memories in unique languages comes at the cost of reaffirming humans as the sole proprietors of language and entitled administrators of physical reality.

Benjamin's emphasis on the narrative and historical life of non-human beings, especially their damage and abuse as a form of traumatization, destabilizes the antithesis of social and deep ecology that continues to structure ecocritical discourses. Deep ecology insists that humanity has to change its appreciation of and attitude toward nature, while social ecology claims that without the abandonment of oppressive relations of production, real environmental change is impossible (NAESS, 1973; BOKCHIN, 1987). This antithesis is essentially a variation of the conflict between idealism and materialism. Either humans must change the way they think in order to change the reality of their surroundings, or they first have to practically change their circumstances in order to see them in a different light. According to Benjamin, human supremacy cannot be dethroned by a change of mind or attitude alone. The solution is not to suddenly listen to the song of nature and begin an eco-conscious life. Rather, ecological change is an integral element and driving force of the global social movement to minimize, if not abandon, aggression and exploitation.

Despite its anti-anthropocentric gesture, Benjamin's philosophy of language rests on a generalization regarding "human" language that tends to efface differences of race, gender, and nationality. Seven billion individuals are not responsible for the economic exploitation and destruction of the environment, but rather a very small number of enterprises and plutocratic elites that are predominantly white, Western, and male (KLEIN, 2014; YUSOFF, 2018). During the rise of European fascisms in the 1920s and 1930s, and in view of the complicity of anthropological generalizations, Benjamin reoriented his focus, fusing his demotion of human language with the ecocritical aspects of historical materialism.

Benjamin's philological attention to natural environments arises early on in his education. Between 1905 and 1907, he attended the Haubinda boarding school in the remote forest of Thuringia. Under the guidance of the ambiguous reform pedagogue Gustav Wyneken, he participated in outdoor activities and excursion characteristic of the German Youth Movement. Born and raised in the city of Berlin, the time Benjamin spent hiking in the countryside made a significant impact on him, as his descriptions of the area around Haubinda show, but it generally remained a curiosity and counterpoint to his urban experience (BENJAMIN, 1991b). Throughout his life and work, Benjamin emphasized the construction of sensual experience in language, which includes the experience of time and nature. This impulse, reminiscent of idealism, became apparent as early as 1912 when he described his journeys in Europe as assuming a higher and fuller reality in his diaries than in his lived experience (BENJAMIN, 1996j). Over the years, this idealist impulse merged in a fruitful and contradictory manner with Benjamin's unorthodox interpretation of Marxist historiography.

This fusion underlies the aphorism "The Tree and Language" (1933). Benjamin describes how, lying on his back under a tree, gazing up into the moving foliage, "language was so gripped by it that momentarily the age-old marriage with the tree was suddenly reenacted once again in my presence" (BENJAMIN, 1996k, p. 699). The marital fusion of language and natural world, the repetition of which made Benjamin forget the tree's name, can be understood as mystic monism. However, read in conversation with Saul Kripke's "original baptism" of an object with an identifier, Benjamin proposes a philological theory of memory that recalls the "primordial form of perception [*Urvernehmen*]" of one being by another.[1] The human being's naming as a response to this perception includes violence, even more so when it cannot be reciprocated by beings that do not use naming language. The task of human language (and Benjamin's ecophilology) is to recall the violence of the act of naming to interrupt the process of nature's subjugation. The power of Benjamin's theory of language resides in its unique balance between idealist and materialist registers. Neither is the human subject idealized as the sole creator of meaning, nor is spiritual life a mere reflection of the empirical world.

One of Benjamin's most impactful concepts, the aura, continues the fusion of environmental considerations and social theory. In a late description of the concept, he defines aura as a gigantic anthropomorphism, referencing forms of early animist object fetishism: "Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects" (BENJAMIN, 1996b, p. 338). Treating art and technology as if they were human individuals that participate in life and death does not lift them objects up into the higher sphere of human life, but subjugates non-human beings by using them as surrogates and means to human ends.

Benjamin's hope was that technological reproducibility would demolish this anthropomorphism, abandoning the cult of originality and authenticity that fuels commodity-based capitalism and fascist idolatry. As Benjamin's descriptions show, the project of aura's demolition—a shattering, but not abandonment of humanity's special place in nature—applies to the realm of art no less than to that of the environment. Benjamin first introduced the concept of aura in the mise-en-scène of a romantic landscape: "To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch" (BENJAMIN, 1996i, p. 105). Within the most innocuous enjoyment of a mountain range the ancient reduction of environments to human purposes is at work.

[1] Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 96, and Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 2003), 36. See also Philip Hogh, *Communication and Expression: Adorno's Philosophy of Language* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 57, 62–64, and Marleen Stoessel, *Aura, das vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin* (München: Hanser, 1983), 65–93.

The aura marks Benjamin's ecocritical adaptation of historical materialism. It preserves his linguistic understanding of perception, as indicated by the definition of aura as a "response," while refunctioning this response to counteract oppressive forms of collective organization. Continuing the refunctioning of human language, the theses "On the Concept of History" (1940) contrast the oppressors' monolithic way of writing history to the manifold languages of "nameless [*namenlose*]" (BENJAMIN, 1996c, p. 392),[2] others, whose resources are anonymized and expropriated to build and maintain the edifice of human culture. The project of demoting human language with respect to the vast cosmos of languages becomes the demotion of the language of the human oppressors vis-à-vis the languages of the oppressed, human and otherwise.

Engaging with the intersection of ecological science and critical humanities, Timothy Morton analyzed the "dark-ecological loop" of human history and geological time, underlining that the question of environmental change is inextricably linked to the question of language and representation (Morton, 2016, p. 7-8). Benjamin's philological attention to environmental trauma complements Morton's perspective. Surely, the environmental crisis will not be averted by resolving a theoretical antithesis. It requires activism and manifest political power to enforce change against the weight of plutocratic greed and ignorance. At the same time, activism has to be informed by critical insight, otherwise it runs the risk of blindly reproducing rather than opposing malevolent politics (ADORNO, 1998). Benjamin's critique of history as the monologue of the victors preserves the environmental elements of his early philosophy of language. A *weak* ecological power connects his ecologue to his critique of history and politics.

Ecologies of Language

In 1916, Benjamin wrote a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem, which is known today under the title "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." The letter was intended for his closest friends and published only in 1955, fifteen years after Benjamin's death. It contains the first formulation of Benjamin's philosophy of language, which he rewrote and modified over the course of his life, translating it into different terminologies and vocabularies without ever changing one of its central intentions—the specification and contextualization of human language within a larger cosmos of language *as such*.

In the essay, Benjamin claims that human language is characterized by the act of naming, and that this act was the reason for humanity's expulsion from the garden of Eden. Human language is compromised by the presumptuousness of naming all creation, leading to what Benjamin's calls "over-naming"—a chatter-like loquaciousness that imposes myriads of signifiers onto things, and in doing so separates them through judgment and classification (BENJAMIN, 1996c, p. 73). As the language of judgement, human language is the paradigmatic language of instrumentalization. Since the dawn of civilization, technology,

[2] Translation changed. See also Thomas Schestag, *Namenlose* (Berlin: Matthes und Seitz, 2020).

art, and politics reproduced and refined this originally linguistic impulse of subjecting nature to humanity's form of expression. Some of the basic figures of thought essential to the Frankfurt School's critique of the Enlightenment sprang from this narrative. About a decade later, during his work on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin translated the theological framework of his early theory into a philosophical terminology, and then again, in 1933, into a vocabulary of anthropology, biology, and sociolinguistics closer to the empirical currents of historical materialism. At every stage, Benjamin grapples in different ways with the question of instrumentality—a word that Hannah Arendt identifies as the essence and principle of violence, or *Gewalt* (1970, 46). If human history is the history of its language, and this history is a history of subjugation and oppression, what ways are there to change this fateful course of events?

Besides its religious, philosophical, and sociological layers, "On Language as Such" has an ecological dimension that continues to permeate Benjamin's subsequent works. This dimension springs from the consideration of nature neither as the ineluctable other of spirit and history, nor as the object of natural sciences and resource of economic activity, but as a web of entities that participate in various intersecting conversations. "The linguistic being of things is their language," Benjamin writes; "this proposition, applied to man, means: the linguistic being of man [*des Menschen*] is his language" (1996c, p.64). The sentence effectively collapses metaphysics and the philosophy of language. Benjamin reduces the anthropological question to that of humanity's linguistic being, which consists in its relationship to the linguistic essences of other beings.

If this is a metaphysical fairy tale that imbues things with languages, it aims at nothing but the demotion of humanity's self-ascribed exceptionalism and superiority over other spheres of reality. This superiority is essentially a question of language and discursive affirmation. The increasing attention of critical humanities to questions of ecology makes it less easy to dismiss Benjamin's theory of language as mysticism or bad metaphysics. Benjamin's project is from the outset one of excavating the origins of modern societies' reification and alienation. One of these origins is the profoundly ecocritical impulse to demote humankind vis-à-vis other realms of being without, however, denying its elevated responsibility to halt and interrupt the oppressive historical dynamic it inaugurated and perpetuates.

The path to this interruption is language, which, for Benjamin, is not primarily about understanding and communication, but about sharing and participation. The question, in other words, is not only if and how an entity speaks, perceives, and interprets, but how it makes its experiences and perceptions available to others. Benjamin asks:

> To whom does man [*der Mensch*] communicate himself?—But is this question, as applied to man, different when applied to other communications (languages)? To whom does the lamp communicate itself? The mountain? The fox?—But here the answer is: to man. This is not anthropomorphism (1996c, p.64).

Benjamin preemptively wards off the objection of anthropomorphism. His model does not invest lamp, mountain, and fox with the capacity to listen and speak. Rather, the language of things is thought, from their perspective, as the part of their communication that is addressed to humans. They also appear in ways entirely unperceivable to us, but what we perceive is meant for us and carries a responsibility to listen to them and take them into consideration.

The ecologically productive twist in Benjamin's model is his enigmatic claim that what things communicate to humans is not a message or knowledge, but *themselves*. There is no content of their communication. Things and creatures share first and foremost their linguistic being, which is coextensive with their unique way of appearing and being perceived (BENJAMIN, 1996c, p. 63). In the case of the lamp, the mountain, and the fox, humans have crudely neglected their unique abilities to appear as what they are, regardless of their purpose or usability for humans. Even the idea of reading geological formations as a record of environmental destruction reduces sediments to the scientific insight they hold for and about us. Questioning this reduction, Benjamin's reflections speak to the idea of listening to the "geostories" (Latour, 2014), that environments share about themselves, allowing us to question human narratives about domination and subjugation.

The Anthropocene discourse regards stone formations as objective records of what humans have done to the planet, even if there were no human beings left to witness or interpret it. In Benjamin's eyes, there is no empirical substrate of experience that is communicated by means of language. Experience is a being's history expressed in language. The Anthropocene discourse tends to anthropomorphize the post-Anthropocene era by assuming human interpretation even when there are no humans left. This reduces the language of stones to a message about humankind, relevant because it can be understood by humans or beings that are *like* humans. Benjamin's theory of language takes the stone's uniqueness seriously by distinguishing what it communicates to us from what it communicates per se. If there are no humans left, the stone's message *for us* has missed its recipient. Nothing more and nothing less.

It is important to appreciate the radical uniqueness that Benjamin's model grants not only to human individuals and animals, but to every entity. Every stone, for Benjamin, is radically unique in its linguistic being. "Equality or sameness is a category of cognition; strictly speaking, it is not to be found in sober perception."[3] Every wave in the sea, every leaf adds to a polyphonous and multidirectional ecologue. From an environmental point of view, there is not much "magic" about Benjamin's theory of language, except for the astonishment produced by the countless languages that humans cannot understand (MENNINGHAUS, 1995). For the drive to scientific abstraction, however, Benjamin's radical emphasis on similarity is a tough pill to swallow.

[3] Letter to Theodor W. Adorno, February 23, 1939. Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1910–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994), 597.

Benjamin's contribution to environmental discourses resides in his attention to the narratives of non-human beings without relativizing humanity's task to change the course of events. This refurbished anthropomorphism is further elucidated in Benjamin's unique interpretation of translation, which, for him, is not the transposition of meaning from one empirical language into another, but the very principle of nature's appearance. Every act of human speech includes myriads of translations from non-human languages into the languages of humans. Each act of translation is part of a cosmic effort to share experiences between analogous spheres of being. The sphere of language above human language is that of God, the absolute, or the "great outdoors" (MEILLASSOUX, 2009, p.07). Humankind's effort to communicate its experience as a whole to the next cosmic layer is essentially inconclusive, revealing in its inconclusiveness a continuum of experience that spans far beyond humanity's spectrum of perception and communication.

Based on his linguistic version of the great chain of being, Benjamin suggests not to assume the existence of human beings as the only, let alone the ideal addressee of human communication, questioning once again the traditional concept of anthropomorphism:

> It should be pointed out […] that certain correlative concepts retain their meaning, and possibly their foremost significance, if they are not from the outset used exclusively with reference to man. One might, for example, speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men [*alle Menschen*] had forgotten it. If the nature of such a life or moment required that it be unforgotten, that predicate would imply not a falsehood but merely a claim unfulfilled by men, and probably also a reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God's remembrance (BENJAMIN, 1996h, p.254).

The acknowledgement of events that are unforgettable, although they are not remembered by any human being, is integral to the time of the Anthropocene. This time is not a geological, historical, or legal concept that is applied more or less accurately to an epoch, but the trace of human action independent of human perception and interpretation. It is a key characteristic of the Anthropocene that human impact on material reality is recorded and objectively preserved after humanity will have seized to exist (CHAKRABARTY, 2009). The reluctance to accept the reality of this record is a remnant of the hyperbolic idealist thought that meaning exists only for us, humans, and if we are not there anymore, reality loses all significance. A brutally self-centered view that relies on the self-ascribed superiority of human consciousness as the peak of history and evolution. By locating consciousness within language, Benjamin dethrones human exceptionalism perhaps more radically than Wittgenstein, who excluded human ethics from scientific certainly, and Heidegger, who preserved a special receptivity of human beings for being as

such. At the same time, he insists on humanity's responsibility to interpret the damages it caused in a way that interrupts the self-aggrandization and traumatic disavowal of human and non-human exploitation.[4]

The insistence on an unforgettable moment beyond the human realm constitutes the metaphysical dimension of Benjamin's early theory of language. Although his view might not be in line with nineteenth and twentieth-century social ontology, its anti-anthropocentrism is the effect of an ecocritical and anti-oppressive impetus. The metaphysical layer of his theory is not a transcendent sphere in which injustice and oppression are remembered for a final day of judgment. Rather, it is a cipher for nature's pre- and posthuman record, composed of myriads of traumatic histories told by entities and creatures. Demolishing the auratic anthropomorphism attached to human language means to *shake* (Latin *citare*) humanity so that the stories engrained in the environments can be heard, translated, and used to regroup and oppose the oppressive voices that seek to silence them.[5]

The trace of forgotten human presence further illuminates the ecocritical implications of Benjamin's concept of the aura. Aura, he writes, is the expectation that human beings direct at the non-human world to communicate in a human way. "Derivation of the aura as the projection of a human social experience onto nature: the gaze is returned" (BENJAMIN, 1996a, p. 173). And: "To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us" (BENJAMIN, 1996b, p. 338). Since this anthropomorphism is an effect of human language, dating back, in Benjamin's eyes, to primordial rituals of religious fetishization, it is human language that has a particular ability and task to work through and refunction its self-imposed exceptionalism.

Benjamin demotes human language only part of the way, stating clearly in his early reflections that human language is higher and closer to God's language than the languages of things and animals. Human language is "the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one, and cannot but add something to it, namely, knowledge" " (BENJAMIN, 1996c, p. 70). The fox and the lamp communicate themselves to human beings, who communicate themselves to God by naming them in return. This is not anthropomorphism, Benjamin insists. When he determines God as the addressee of the plurality of human languages in their intersecting translations, he points toward a more embracive sphere that is not an ideal wholeness or complete memory, but the inconclusive record of nature. The ecology of languages in Benjamin's early writings is a continuous scale, inspired by the Scholastics' *analogia entis*—a continuum of increasing perfection from inanimate matter up to divine being (ROBERTS, 1982).

[4] Benjamin's view rests on a reflected relation to the absolute, distinct from Heidegger's weak and Wittgenstein's strong correlationalism. Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 35–38; and Gunnar Hindrichs, *Das Absolute und das Subjekt: Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Metaphysik und Nachmetaphysik* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2011), 152–57.

[5] On Benjamin's notions and tropes of shattering and shaking geological and political grounds, see Jason Groves, *The Geological Unconscious: German Literature and the Mineral Imaginary* (Fordham UP, 2020), 93–114.

The strategic demotion of human language bridges the antithesis between deep and social ecology that weakens revolutionary practices in the age of the Anthropocene. Humans are neither in charge and have to restore what they have damaged by means of institutional change, nor are they supposed to realize their transitory smallness and insignificance amidst an affective environmental cosmos. Benjamin's ecologue insists that everything speaks and deserves to be heard. So far, humans speak in a way that organizes and subjugates natural objects through naming and judgment, but their language also allows for the interruption of this subjugation.

Nature's Mourning

Humankind's assertion of supremacy is at the origin of what Benjamin calls nature's sadness:

> After the Fall, […] the appearance of nature is deeply changed. Now begins […] the 'deep sadness of nature.' It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language (though 'to endow with language' is more than 'to make able to speak'). This proposition has a double meaning. It means, first, that [nature] would lament language itself. Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature (and for the sake of her redemption the life and language of man—not only, as is supposed, of the poet—are in nature). This proposition means, second, that she would lament. Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent [*ohnmächtig*] expression of language. It contains scarcely more than the sensuous breath; and even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament. Because she is mute, nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness of nature makes her mute. In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate. That which mourns feels itself thoroughly known by the unknowable (ROBERTS, 1982, p. 72-3).

If nature would speak in a manner comprehensible to humans, it would lament. It would lament, first, *language itself*—the historical state of language, its uses and abuses. Secondly, it would lament as a way of mourning. This mourning differs significantly from Freud's work of mourning as a process of recollection, repetition, and working through. It is a minimal expression of sadness; undifferentiated and without content or intention.[6] Every rustling of the tree is an attempt to be heard and included. The romantics' as well as the realists' attention to nature is a way of endowing it with language—not of giving voice to something voiceless, but of opening an ear that allows something to participate in a sphere of language that is not its own. Why would this be up to the human being? It is an overwhelming task that speaks from Benjamin's sentence that *for the sake of nature's redemption, human life and language are in nature*. Nature is not only sad because it is mute; it is mute because it is sad. This inversion reveals the pedagogical impetus of Benjamin's ecologue: Nature knows more about mourning than humans.

[6] On Benjamin's understanding of lament and mourning, see Ilit Ferber, "Lament and Pure Language: Scholem, Benjamin and Kant," *Jewish Studies Quarterly 21*, no. 1 (2014), 42–54, and Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013), 120, 141.

In his meditation on the life and experience of animals, Derrida states that he cannot follow Benjamin's remarks about the sadness of nature (DERRIDA, 2018). In Derrida's reading, what makes nature sad is that it is named. Without words, nature can neither name itself nor others. Being named—receiving one's name from another—leads to sadness and mourning because it is a foreshadowing of death. Having a name means being outlived and survived by one's own ghost—by the memories attached to one's name. Non-human beings know more about mourning than humans because they are named without being able to name in return. Derrida disagrees with Benjamin because of the scene and time of redemption in which nature's speechless mourning takes place. In Derrida's eyes, Benjamin's demotion of human language does not go far enough. Human language continues to be endowed with the task of redeeming nature; a hope in which human supremacy survives. Ultimately, this supremacy springs from the narrative of an original failing in both Judaism and Christianity that allegedly grants humans the right to be compensated for having been treated unjustly (IBID).

In ecocritical terms, Benjamin's insistence on human language's task to interrupt the history of oppression is in conflict with Derrida's critique that this task is not modest enough and preserves human exceptionalism.[7] For Derrida, Benjamin's analogous scale of languages from matter up to the language of God is a hierarchy that has to be deconstructed. It holds on to a gradual closeness to divine being and continues to revolve around the special task of redemption that humans hold in the chain of languages[8]. If changing the relation to nature is not a task of human language and historiography, but of behaving more modestly and thinking less hierarchically, then the antithesis of deep and social ecology reappears. Humans should either stay out of the non-human realm when their involvement is self-serving, or they should own up to the position of human superiority, gain political power, and enforce ecological change. Benjamin's later writings leave the core of his philosophy of language remarkably unaltered while adding a materialist layer that allows to further reconcile the antithesis of deep and social ecology. Since human language has the ability to translate non-human languages into a more embracive sphere of communicability, its redemptive task is the translation of linguistic being into anti-oppressive political narratives.

Ecophilology and the Expansion of Nature

The ecological perspective offers a new way of connecting Benjamin's early philosophy of language to his later philosophy of history. Characteristic of Benjamin's turn to historical and dialectical materialism

[7] On the notion of the age's modesty, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 1–7.

[8] In *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin abandons the logical notion of analogy, focusing instead on the literary trope of allegory, which offers a more decentered and multidirectional model for the relationship between meaning and being. Benjamin's readings of Heidegger's postdoctoral thesis on Thomas of Erfurt and Duns Scotus from 1915 were of major importance for Benjamin's shift.

is the broad framing of his interpretation, including the premise that the redemption of nature, thought along the lines of the French utopian Charles Fourier, is the last effect and goal of classless society. In "Surrealism" (1929), Benjamin notes that the "metaphysical materialism" of Carl Vogt and Nikolai Bukharin cannot be translated without rupture into the "anthropological materialism" of Georg Büchner, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and the Surrealists, adding that "the bodily collective not abstract matter or the cosmos has to be the basis of materialism" (BENJAMIN, 1996l, p.217; 1991a, p. 1041). This remark can be interpreted, on the one hand, as falling back behind Marx's dialectical sociology due to a lack of mediation between base and superstructure, if not as a regressive mysticism of the masses. On the other hand, it can be read as reintroducing the sensual registers and emotional dimensions of the human collective lost in the social ontology of *Capital*.[9] Both interpretations converge in Benjamin's project of transforming the collective by reconceiving the links between the human and the non-human. The poetic reconfiguration of the collective body that Benjamin describes is tied to a changed understanding and use of language not as an instrument of revolutionary practice, but as a medium that allows for a reciprocal metabolism between human and non-human spheres of being.

What should be transformed is not only society and the human being as the ensemble of social relations, but nature in a broader sense. Benjamin is inspired by Fourier's descriptions of a world in which the moon comes back to life, the salty seas turn into lemonade, and humans grow tails again, while passion and work are reconciled (1996, p. 29). Fourier spells out a more extensive understanding of physical reality that reflects the ecocritical shift from nature to the environment. "The paroxysm of genuine cosmic experience," Benjamin writes, "is not tied to that tiny fragment of nature that we are accustomed to call 'Nature'" (Benjamin, 1996e, p. 487). A true change of human affairs would affect more than property relations and the abuse of industrial resource—it would communicatively discover spheres of being hitherto excluded from what is classified as nature.

In Benjamin's image of the tiny human being that returned from the battlefields of World War I not richer, but poorer in communicable experience, the notion of a broadened environment reappears. "A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body" (BENJAMIN, 1996g, p. 732). Not even the clouds are the same, commentators recently noted. "The clouds, above all, changed everything" (FAY, 2009, p. 27-8). Ceasing to be silent observers, the clouds become the counterpoint to the fragile human body, defined more and more on the backdrop of polluted oceans, landscapes, and atmospheres. Benjamin described the effects

[9] Irving Wohlfarth, "Les noces de 'Physis' et de 'Techne': Walter Benjamin et l'idée d'un matérialisme anthropologique," *Cahier Charles Fourier* 21 (January 2011), 121–30, and Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner, "Erwachen aus dem Traumschlaf. Walter Benjamins Historismus," in *Listen der Vernunft: Motive geschichtsphilosophischen Denkens* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1998) 150–81.

of human behavior on the environment in the dramatic image of nuptials turning into a bloodbath—the same nuptials that once fused the tree and its name. "Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth" (BENJAMIN, 1996e, p. 486).

Benjamin held a failed reception of technology responsible for the spasmic destruction of humans and environments, and it is again Fourier who shows the path to an alternative reception. Based on his writings, Benjamin distinguishes first and second technology, analogous to the distinction between first and second nature. First technology uses the human body as much as possible, while second technology distances it from the environment. "The achievements of first technology culminate in human sacrifice; those of the second, in the remote-controlled aircraft which needs no human crew" (BENJAMIN, 1996i, p. 107). Revolutions, from this perspective, are collective innervations of technology not as a means of controlling human and natural resources, but of reorganizing the relationship between nature and humanity. What Benjamin calls second technology distances humans from the environment, creating room for play, or *Spielraum*, in which the existential concerns of first nature, love death, and the closeness to nature can be acted out in a less aggressive and fatalistic manner. "Fourier's work is the first historical evidence of this demand" (IBID, p. 124).

One of Benjamin's last comments on the question of anthropomorphism and the environment relates it closely to political practice in times of radically transforming democracy. A few months into World War II, he criticized the German social democrats for upholding a vulgar conception of labor that "recognizes only the progress in mastering nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features that later emerge in fascism" (BENJAMIN, 1996d, p. 393). Benjamin discerned the antidote to this technocracy in Fourier's visions in which "cooperative labor would increase efficiency to such an extent that four moons would illuminate the sky at night, the polar ice caps would recede, seawater would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding" (IBID, p. 394). For Benjamin, changing how industrial capitalism relates to the environment is neither a question of direct action, nor of the individual's insight into the precious value of non-human entities, but a question of the political narrative provide by revolutionary historiography. The hope is that if historical time is not portrayed as an empty progression into an open, homogenous, and exploitable future, but rather as an intensification of being in the historical present, nature will eventually not be seen as something that "exists gratis" (IBID) anymore.

Promoting the intensification of being does not seek to maximize human quality of life. The urgent task is to halt and restrain the damage, and to redirect destructive energies. Creating flows of political narratives that oppose malevolent power structures consists in working through the traumatic experiences of human and non-human collectives. Granting environments their own ability to describe their damages—from environmental racism to deforestation and unbridled industrial pollution—is a step towards ending

the trauma inflicted on environments. This is not anthropomorphism. The act of hearing ecological damage does not aim at improving human life or preserving its future. The pain caused for organic and non-organic environments is a blocking of cosmic narration. The earth's traumatic record is an open wound. It provides fractured and damaged grounds for political narratives that oppose idolatry and capitalist extraction. It is not about strategically adding ecological narratives, but about permeating political practice *as such* with an awareness for the environments that support human existence.

Working through the environmental trauma caused by human collectives might not succeed as long as mourning is seen as a kind of labor. Nevertheless, human social practice can make use of the wounds of the past to change the course of history. It is not the better future of our children and grandchildren that builds momentum for political change, but the anger triggered by the oppression and exploitation of the predecessors, human or not, who must not have suffered in vain. This goes for suppressed revolutions as well as for environmental disasters, and although anger cannot have the last word, it is a strong fuel of political practice. Benjamin began his essay on surrealism with the image of a power station that he constructed on the river of literary quality that flowed steeply downwards from France to Germany (BENJAMIN, 1996l). A philological ecology installs turbines along the flows of the stories that environments share about themselves. What fuels these turbines is a *weak* ecological power that springs from nature's ways of mourning. Few things disprove regressive political movements more than their disregard for environmental concerns (STANLEY, 2018). Their ultimate stumbling block is the idea of a nature that does not exist gratis anymore.

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