Contributi/7

Violence as Expression

The impact of Leibniz and the Baroque on Walter Benjamin's Political Thought

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This article explores the influence of G. W. Leibniz in Walter Benjamin's political texts, with a focus on his *Towards a Critique of Violence* on the centennial of its appearance. It argues that Benjamin's concepts are grounded on linguistic, metaphysical and epistemological structures that were common during the Baroque, and where the notion of expression plays a key role. Furthermore, the paper provides a web of sources for understanding Benjamin's direct and indirect reception of Leibniz and his peculiar application to reflect on modern problems. Ultimately, this article aims to illuminate elements of the Benjaminian text that have been neglected or obscured, by bringing it closer to its origins, and going beyond the mystical remarks that have been attached to it.

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Introduction

Walter Benjamin's work has challenged and fascinated scholars for the last decades. Nonetheless, there is a side to his work that has been consistently avoided, misunderstood or simply set aside as a macula of his early philosophical strivings. The pronounced esotericism of his early texts has been dismissed, underestimated or regarded as part of a metaphysics immersed in kabalistic paraphernalia aimed at the initiated[1]. Only a handful of researchers have made an

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[1] Many scholars overestimate the allegiance between Benjamin and Jewish sources when dealing with those topics. For instance, Eric Jacobson writes that: «Judaism was at the center of his speculation, his subject being the principle dimension of the Torah.» (E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, New York 2003, p. 86). Likewise, Tamara Tagliacozzo argues: «Doctrine is a metaphysical religious term that Benjamin and Scholem often identify with the ethical-religious teaching of the Torah and its

association between those 'extraordinary' but outdated elements from Benjamin and the philosophy of Leibniz. Even fewer have engaged in full-fledge analyses to understand thoroughly the underlying connections[2].

Facing these tensions, it can be said that many of those very aspects of Benjamin's that strike many commentators as 'extravagant,' even 'bizarre', are indeed direct or indirect loans from Leibniz's system, and can be accordingly read as cues to the socio-political organization of the Baroque. This article concentrates on some key aspects of this influence as it operates broadly on Benjamin's political thinking, and specifically in an early but fundamental text: *Towards a Critique of Violence* [*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*] from 1921.

1. Towards a Critique I. Means and Ends

In his essay *Zur Kritik*, Benjamin begins his disquisition by setting the discussion of the problem of violence in terms of the law [*Recht*] and the idea of justice [*Gerechtigkeit*]. According to him, violence appears in two different conceptual arrangements, structured under means or under ends. In this track, he claims that there have been two main conceptions in the tradition of the philosophy of law that have organized the notion of violence within specific conceptual apparatuses. *Natural Law* (Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza) 'naturalized' violence, and rendered it not only unquestionable and ahistorical, but also ethically consistent, as long as it was used for just ends. In turn, *Positive Law* (Bentham, Weber, Kelsen) 'historized' violence, building up a legal structure that focuses on the legitimacy of the means by which it constructs a social order. He therefore creates a very straightforward semantic matrix with which he shows a dualistic historical conception that had remained problematic, but nevertheless

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commentaries. It encompasses and in part transcends philosophy and its system, which tend virtually, in an in finite process, to coincide with Torah.» (T. Tagliacozzo. *Experience and Infinite Task: Knowledge, Language and Messianism in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*. NY & London 2018, p. 3). These interpretations stand in a stark contrast to what Gershom Scholem himself wrote about the philosopher: «Benjamin did not know a thing […] about Jewish relations.» (G. Scholem. *Walter Benjamin. Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, Frankfurt 1975, p. 93.) Even if the associations between Benjamin and Jewish sources are not patently false, hasty and uncareful genealogies obscure the fact that Benjamin was actually reading very closely Baroque and Romantic writers from the German tradition who were immersed precisely in those metaphysical issues, and that among them, Leibniz and Böhme played preeminent roles, as we will see.

[2] A few but outstanding sources include R. Nägele, *Das Beben des Barock in der Moderne: Walter Benjamins Monadologie*, «MLN», CVI, 1991, pp. 501-527; H. Teschke, *Proust und Benjamin: unwillkürliche Erinnerung und dialektisches Bild*, Würzburg 2000, esp. pp. 99-109; H. Kaffenberger, *Orte des Lesens, Alchimie, Monade: Studien zur Bildlichkeit im Werk Walter Benjamins*, Würzburg 2001; P. Fenves, *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin*, Stanford 2001 or P. Schweber, *Intensive Infinity: Walter Benjamin's Reception of Leibniz and its Sources*, «MLN», CXXVII, 2012, pp. 589-610.

accepted and fundamentally uncritized, up to the time of his analysis. The following table synthesizes the traits he assigns to each form[3]:

	Means	Ends	Highest Value
Natural Law	- aspires to 'justify' means	- critique of ends	Justice
		- no historical acknowledgement	(Divine foundation of ends)
		- **violence** of just, natural ends	
Positive Law	- critique of means	- aspires to 'guarantee' ends	Legitimacy
	- legal **violence**	- historical acknowledgement	(Mythic foundation of right)

The semiotic opposition arising between both historical forms is symmetric and forthright. Once one excludes the situation of unjust ends, which none of these would openly pursue, one obtains a working ethical context that should be self-contained and self-explaining. If that were effectively the case, violence would have been rightly understood and efficiently sanctioned. But Benjamin breaks down the pretended immanence of the scheme. He aims to show how positive law involves no progression from natural law, but implies instead a mere reordering of concepts that would make both fall under an intractable jurisprudential paradox: violence as a way to justify the attainment of justice and the validity of laws that would prevent it from happening.

To explain this, Benjamin argues that positive law – the current legal order – leans on a «fatally necessary», «rotten» condition[4]: the need to rely on external situations to hold the system together. Among these, he counts State-endorsed mechanisms inserted in normalized practices, such as the obligatory military service (militarism), the death penalty, the setting of borders or the functioning of the police, but also the strike, as a State-tolerated mechanism stemming from society. All these practices – except for the police, which would be the body by which the State enforces its legitimate power directly over the population on an everyday basis – employ forms of violence that turn out to be foundational and law-positing [*rechtsetzende*] or law-preserving [*rechtserhaltende*] for the implementation of the law under this logic[5]. Benjamin argues that the legal order has become a governmental technique in which the inside/outside paradigm

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[3] From W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt 1991 (henceforth as *GS*), 2, pp. 179-191, 198.
[4] *GS* 2, p. 187-188.
[5] *GS* 2, p. 186-187.

has become instrumental for the sovereign State and for the constitution of a juridical form of control, which rather than eradicating violence from social life, merely aims at administering it[6].

Out of this logic, Benjamin envisions an alternative paradigm. One important component for it would be what he calls «pure means» [*reine Mittel*], that is, situations outside the 'legitimate means – rightful ends' positivist opposition upon which human interactions can be effectively, and non-violently, sanctioned. These include exchanges based on «courtesy, affection, love of peace, trust» and the like[7], and would be sedimented in the possibilities of mutual understanding provided by language[8]. But this new paradigm cannot fall into the naivety of the good will, and must acknowledge a key element: the existence of other forms of violence that overwhelm the legal order, rendering it useless. Therefore, such forms of violence would fall far from the means-ends opposition too. To explain his thesis, he starts by explaining a phenomenological act: an *outburst of anger*, for example, which is not related as a means to a preconceived end. It is an event that happens suddenly, unannounced. But it brings together a certain inner world with its social context: it connects, brings forth a mood (*Stimmung*) and only in that way determines (*be-stimmen*), linking an individual's world together.

Through his example, Benjamin introduces a new opposition: mythic vs. divine violence. While he explores the extent and outreach of mythic violence (a more-than-human, godly force that irrupts in legends and traditions through the infusing of 'fear'), he argues that, in the end, it proves to be foundational of a legal order too[9]. So he is left with the only viable category that fulfills his criteria: divine violence. To understand what these criteria are, as well as to comprehend what Benjamin sets under this category, it is useful to analyze his demand to observe violent forms that escape the dualism of means and ends. Benjamin argues that «the non-mediated function of [this form of] violence […] is not a means, but a manifestation [*Manifestation*].»[10] As a manifestation, divine violence needs to be assessed from a different critical vantage. In this sense, the correct question regarding this force can no longer be what violence means (which will always beget a mythical, functionalized typology), but must be turned instead to ask what it manifests. From this viewpoint, the philosophical importance of

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[6] This idea is contemporary to the appearance of Carl Schmitt's book *On Dictatorship* (1921) and precedes his *Political Theology* (1922), where the well-known jurist argues that the executive power is founded on the possibility of the leader to declare a state of exception [*Ausnahmezustand*]. Benjamin shows instead, through a series of examples, that such exceptionality is not needed to observe the performativity of a legal and ongoing civil war, as the normal state of affairs.

[7] *GS* 2, p. 191.

[8] Mainly in non-instrumental, non-communicative forms of linguistic exchange, as we will see.

[9] Benjamin explains: «Far from opening up a purer sphere, the mythical manifestation of direct violence shows itself to be deeply identical with all legal authority and makes the premonition of its problems a certainty of the corruptibility of its historical function, the destruction of which becomes thus a task.» (*GS* 2, p. 199).

[10] *GS* 2, p. 196.

the category of divine violence lies now in what it discloses, or makes manifest, rather than in the fitness of means to ends or the appropriateness of measures to legitimate an institutional setting.

And what does violence manifest? This is the question that should now be of concern. As such, the form of the question reminds the same quest upon the essence of language that Benjamin attempted in his earlier essay on language from 1916[11]. There he states: «What does language communicate?» And he answers explicitly: «It communicates its spiritual essence [*geistige Wesen*]»[12]. In other words, language, in Benjamin's formulation, should not be taken as a vehicle for a message, nor as an instrument, but as an expression of its own specific being. Likewise, violence beyond any ends, and as an unmediated event, should be taken as a manifestation of its own essence, its intrinsic proper nature. The formal description might be clear (or at least attached to a necessary assessment of his valuation of language), but nothing else is further explained in the text. Yet, when examined carefully, the action of manifesting can be understood as requiring two things, one of which gives or allows the other to obtain a specific form or concretion[13]. If this is so, it can be assumed that Benjamin was thinking along the notion of *expression*, since he explicitly refers to that term on his essays on language. In that case, the interpretative key to Benjamin's account of a

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[11] This is the text *On Language as such and on the Language of Man* [Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen]. Benjamin actually repeated the same question-form in his other text on language from 1923, *The Task of the Translator* [*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*], where he asks: «What does a poem say? What does it communicate?» (*GS* 4, p. 9). This formulation highlights this specific quest as a recurrent *topos* of inquiry. In any case, Benjamin himself, in a explicit note written at the time of the *Zur Kritik* essay, explains that there is a necessary relation between non-mediated violence and language: «The same manifestation [of divine violence] is not to be sought in the sphere of the social, but in the public perception, and lastly and above all in language, first and foremost [form of] the sacred.» (*GS* 6, p. 99). On a letter to Scholem dated November 2016, he also claimed explicitly that his question on the essence of law, knowledge and art should be read together with his research on the origin of language (see *GS* 2, p. 932).

[12] *GS* 2, p. 142.

[13] With the noun *Manifestation* Benjamin uses a German latinized form. One can find meanings for it in at least three different semantic fields (two of which are relevant in our context). The first one would recover the Latin liturgical use, grouping thus *Manifestation* with *Offenbarung* or *Entfaltung* (correspondingly 'revelation', and 'unfolding' or 'development'). The second field relates it with the modern German use, where *Manifestation* is defined, following the *Duden* German dictionary, as «the becoming clear, visible, statement of something determinate» [*das Deutlich-, Sichtbarwerden, Bekundung von etwas Bestimmtem*]. In this case, *Manifestation* as a noun is connected with the verb *zu manifestieren*, which means, according to the same source, 'to reveal something specific, to reveal oneself, to become visible, to express' [*als etwas Bestimmtes offenbaren, sich zu erkennen geben, sichtbar werden, zum Ausdruck bringen*]. In this second case, synonyms for it include the nouns *Beweis, Demonstration, Evidenz, Dokumentation*, but also – relevant here – *Ausdrucken* (correspondingly 'proof', 'demonstration', 'evidence', 'documentation' and 'expression'). The third field associates *Manifestation* as a public demonstration, with the nouns *Kundgebung* or *Aufmarsch* ('rally', and 'march' or 'parade'). Due to its Latin origin, the term can be also translated into other European languages more patently. In English, the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines 'to manifest' as «to show something clearly, through signs or actions.» This 'through' implies the interweaving of two different planes. It clearly presents the relation as a form of representation.

different form of violence implies not only a relation to his theory of language, but also a connection to the provocative idea that *violence is expressive*. To explore what this could mean, it is helpful to turn to other texts that Benjamin was writing at the time[14], where the epistemology, aesthetics, metaphysics and the political thinking of the Baroque appear as a fundamental influence. And within it, the philosophy of Leibniz stands as the main source from which to develop an underlying interpretation.

2. Expression in Leibniz: Epistemological Aspects

Expression is for Leibniz one of the most important notions to explain a relation between two things from different domains. The philosopher attempts a definition repeatedly. In one of his most noted formulations, he writes: «One thing expresses another […] when there is a constant and regulated relation between what can be said of the one and of the other.»[15] Expression is therefore for the philosopher the output of an ordered relation between two things. Different authors have interpreted Leibniz's use of this concept as a kind of isomorphism between a representation and what it represents[16]. Yet, while illuminating, this explanation is at most metaphoric[17]. There seems to be a very narrow space to reconcile different uses of the same concept, especially when Leibniz sought for it applications in mathematics and algebra, as well as in linguistics and other fields[18]. Nevertheless, the notion appears very clear when one realizes what kind

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[14] The year 1916 was specially a fruitful one, since Benjamin wrote at the same time the text on language *Über die Sprache…*, and two more opuscules: *Trauerspiel and Tragedy* and *The meaning of language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy*. Benjamin's work on the Baroque – *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* – was published in 1928, with a note on the first page that claimed it had been devised in 1916, and written in 1925. The text *Zur Kritik* can be read along this constellation. As the editors of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* explain, those initial «texts contain central insights that were developed theoretically in the [*Ursprung…*] book, already flourishing in themselves.» (*GS* 1, p. 884). In that sense, Benjamin was already working on different presentations of the same problems.
[15] G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, Berlin 1875-1890, (henceforth as *GP*), II, p. 112.
[16] See here R. F. McRae, *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception, and Thought*, Toronto 1976, pp. 23 and 42; D. Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature*, Cambridge 1995, p. 236; A. Simmons, *Changing the Cartesian Mind: Leibniz on Sensation, Representation and Consciousness*, «The Philosophical Review» 110, 2001, pp. 31-75, esp. pp. 67-68.
[17] Chris Swoyer argues that isomorphism requires a «complete similarity of structure» between the things related. In my view, this is a strict reading of isomorphism, but since Leibniz did not use the concept, as he involved instead mathematical examples, it could be best to avoid the thorough implications of this notion. Nevertheless, the mere discussion around it surely clarifies the limits of the notion of expression. See C. Swoyer, *Leibnizian Expression*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 33, 1995, pp. 65-99, esp. p. 87.
[18] In different places Leibniz mentions as an example of expression the perspectival projection of a conic section onto a plane. (For example, in his *Letter to Arnauld* of 1687 he writes: «It is so, that the perspectival projection expresses its geometric [*geometral*].» *GP* II, p. 112. Similar examples occur in *GP* I, p. 383; in Leibniz, *Neue Abhandlungen über den menschlichen Verstand*, ed. W. Engelhardt, H. H. Holz, Frankfurt 1996 (henceforth *NA*), I, p. 146; in G. W. Leibniz, *Was ist eine Idee?* in *Schriften zur Logik und philosophischen Grundlegung*, Frankfurt 1996, p.

of cognitive operations it implies and what it is called to accomplish, according to Leibniz.

To appreciate the first issue, we need to understand that expression is a species of representation. In this sense, it mobilizes a precise set of actions over ideas: contemplation, selection, connection, reduction/expansion, filtering and/or distilment[19]. Moreover, expression is not defined in terms of causation[20], but as a relation of similarity and one-to-one correspondences between different things, mediums or even systems. To give a very clear example, one can think of a map as the graphic expression of a territory or a landscape, for it maintains the same order and internal proportions, so that one can use it to travel through the actual territory that it represents. This does not yield a perfect similitude, but that is not expected. For the key to expression, following Chris Sowyer, is *preservation of structure*; therefore, one could state that «one thing expresses a second just in case there is a structure-preserving mapping from either to the other»[21]. This interpretation works even in cases where there are few elements to relate both things, for that does not affect the exactness of the relation[22]. Furthermore, it shows that expression does not necessarily imply juxtaposition, some kind of physical contact between the related things or even synchronicity between them. Expression is a form of resemblance that establishes a functional relation between things[23].

65, or in Leibniz, *Opuscules et fragments inédits*, ed. L. Couturat, Paris 1903 (henceforth as *C*), p. 15. This could be then set as the paradigm of expression in Leibniz for its uses in algebra and mathematics, but not as the whole application of this term, especially regarding his epistemology and his theory of language, as we will see. This important distinction between uses had been already established early on by Paul Köhler in his *Der Begriff der Repräsentation bei Leibniz*, Bern 1913, esp. pp. 34-35.

[19] The actions described here could mean that there is a conscious operation needed to articulate the idea of an expression. But Leibniz involves also unconscious actions, implied in the performance of the *petites perceptions*, as when he writes that «these insensible perceptions still mark and constitute the same individual that is characterized by the traces or *expressions* that they conserve from previous states of that individual, making the connection with her present state, which will be known by a superior spirit, even if that individual would not feel it […].» *NA* I, p. XXIV.

[20] Although Leibniz sometimes seems to imply it, to some extent; for example, when he writes that natural expression requires either «similarity […] or […] some connection such as that between a circle and the ellipse which represents it optically.» And then: «Similarly every entire effect represents the whole cause.» (*GP* VII, p. 264). Also in Leibniz. *Discours de Métaphysique*, in *Kleine Schriften zur Metaphysik*, Frankfurt 1996 (henceforth as *DM*), § 28, p. 136. Therefore, Daniel Garber insists on keeping some form of causation (see D. Garber, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*, Oxford 2009, esp. pp. 216-224). But Losonsky offers a more plausible solution when he states that «[e]ffects represent their causes not simply because they are the effects of those causes, but because there is a similarity or mapping between the properties of the effect and the properties of the cause.» (M. Losonsky, *Leibniz's Adamic Language of Thought*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy» 30/4, 1992, pp. 523-643, esp. p. 534, n. 35).

[21] Swoyer, cit. p. 82.

[22] As Leibniz writes, «the motions of the object which cause the color, the warmth, the pain etc. […] *express* the object through some rather exact relationship [*rapport assés exact*] […]» *NA* I, p. 150.

[23] Kulstad offers a mathematical account of the term 'functional' when associated to the term 'expression' (M. Kulstad, *Leibniz's Conception of Expression,* «Studia Leibnitiana» 9/1, 1977, pp.

This leads to our second issue. Since the order of things pertaining to the object of expression is mirrored by the order of the things in the object that achieves the expression, we can use the latter to generate inferences about the former. This means that a form of knowledge is possible: expression is an epistemic maneuver. Leibniz writes: «What is common to all […] expressions is that we can pass from a consideration of the relations in the expression to a knowledge of the corresponding properties of the thing expressed.»[24] Leibniz exemplifies this in the same passage with the idea of a circle, which is not similar to the circle, nonetheless «truths can be derived from it which would be confirmed beyond doubt by investigating a real circle»[25]. In that case, we can study the thing that expresses something to gain insights about what is being expressed. Expression is set thus as a metonymic device of knowledge[26]. This is not only convenient for the observer – a thing at reach can be used to explore something else beyond reach – but it also opens the world as a place of hidden or ciphered signs that contain aspects of major truths. Leibniz's texts are full of references to what can be 'read' in the Book of Nature through perceptions, introspections or by attending the intensive relationships from within a monad. In this sense, everything that is expressed is a form of 'character' (whether natural or constructed), since what is expressed can be read from the internal structure and sequence of relations in an expression.

One of the main implications of a metonymic form of expression is that it wards off arbitrariness (which follows from the mechanistic understanding of nature implied by Cartesian metaphysics). In this sense, the function of expression allows and facilitates a quest to look out for essential relationships between our perceptions and their objects. By restoring the inner qualities of things – that is, the capacity of individual substances to express the order of the world in a condensed manner, according to the structure of the perceived– one is able to devise not only a particular machinery, but the mechanics of the entire universe[27]. In the end, God guarantees the accuracy of the minute or hidden relationships between perceptions and their objects, so every seemingly arbitrary detail discovers its foundation – or sufficient reason – in divine understanding. Moreover, since a preexisting harmony prevails between all substances, perceptions are not only determinations of a subject, but they can be read as objective expressions of the world as God's creature.

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55-76, esp. p. 61). Nevertheless, since I will not be dealing with its mathematical application, I use 'functional' here in its most wide use, as when something 'functions' or 'works', therefore, is operative and even practical.

[24] *GP* VII, p. 263.

[25] *GP* VII, p. 264.

[26] Swoyer has observed this trait of Leibnizian epistemology too, and has described it as the mechanism of a *surrogate reasoning* (Swoyer, op, cit. p. 84). Nevertheless, 'surrogate' suggests that something becomes a symbolical replacement for something else. While this can be true of mathematical applications, it is not exactly this what Leibniz implies with his theory of language, where signs are not in place of ideas, but their actual embodiment, as we will see.

[27] This is explained in many passages, for example in *DM* § 16, p. 102: «every person or substance is like a small world that expresses a bigger one.»

Furthermore, Leibniz argues that, since each monad is capable of expression, its essence is everything that it expresses, this is its nature and its power[28]. And since ideas are taken as expressions mobilized by the mind[29], this implies that, regarding their cognitive possibilities, ideas are expressions of worldly truths, produced when inner cogitations stand in accordance with divine understanding[30]. In other words, this would mean that ideas are expressions themselves that represent the world and the archetypes of the divine order insofar as they adequately represent the condensed but precise totality of their contents. To be able to do this, ideas must be sequenced to enable thought[31]. This is where the notion of language comes to the fore.

3. On Leibniz's Theory of Language and its Relation to Adamic Language

According to Robert McRae, Leibniz developed his theory of expression beyond the notion of perception, when he devised a universal language and a corresponding universal characteristic[32]. Correspondingly, the philosopher would have considered linguistic characters or signs as typical cases of expression. Leibniz writes:

I call that a character which is a visible mark representing thoughts. The ars characteristic is the art of forming and ordering characters, so that they refer to thoughts, or that they have that relation among themselves that the thoughts have among themselves. An expression is the collection of characters representing the thing which is to be expressed. The law of expression is this: when the idea of the thing to be expressed is composed of certain things, the expression of the thing should be composed of the characters of those things[33].

What Leibniz calls here the *law of expression* suggests again some kind of metonymic usage of linguistic signs. But this is not all. By postulating an exact correlation between an expression and the signs that express it, Leibniz is again working against the idea of arbitrariness, but this time at the level of language, aiming thus at the relation between words and things. Nevertheless, in other writings Leibniz notices that the matter is not that simple in this domain. For our thoughts and ideas are not mere discoveries of fixed connections between things and the signs that represent or express them. Leibniz suggests instead the

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[28] *DM* § 16, p. 104.
[29] Leibniz maintains that an idea is an «immediate inner object, and that this object expresses the nature or qualities of things.» *NA* I, p. 98. We also know that Leibniz holds the doctrine of innate ideas (i.e. that ideas were inscribed upon man during creation) as he makes it clear in the *Discours*, *DM* § 26, p. 130-132.
[30] This follows from a reading of *NA* II p. 318 and *DM* § 28, pp. 134-136.
[31] As implied in *DM* § 29, p. 136-138.
[32] McRae, cit. p. 20.
[33] In G. W. Leibniz, *Die Leibniz-Handschriften der Koniglichen offentlichen Bibliothek zu Hannover*, ed. E. Bodemann, Hildesheim 1966, (henceforth *EB*), pp. 80-81.

principle that ideas and thoughts are indeed formed *through* language. He states this thesis in different passages. For example, in the *Dialogue* (1677):

> B. This [...] makes me realize that in my thinking I never recognize, discover, or prove any truth without calling up to mind words or some other kind of signs. A. Yes, if there were no characters, we should never think or conclude anything intelligibly[34].

Or in handwritten notes, in a very clear account:

> Most of our reasoning, mainly those involved in major issues, are performed by playing with characters, as we play the piano partly by habit, without the soul being quite conscious of it, and forming the reasons reflectively[35].

Leibniz's insight is groundbreaking[36]. According to it, thoughts are shaped through the signs that 'convey' them. However, the arbitrariness of the sign that this amounts to – since a high level of abstraction in thinking quickly looses denotation[37] – seems to be at odds with his metaphysical consistency. After all, Leibniz was engaged with some form of language of nature[38] that could account for innate ideas, and that could be at once universal, comprehensive, accurate, (somehow) nonarbitrary and dynamic (i.e. causally powerful)[39]. He had sought

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[34] *GP* VII, p. 191. I use here the English translation from *Leibniz Selections*, ed. P. P. Wiener, New York 1951, p. 9.

[35] *EB* p. 97. Another place where a similar argument occurs is in the § 5 of the *Ungraspable Thoughts* [*Unvorgreiffliche Gedanken*] (1697), where Leibniz writes: «the words are not only signs of thoughts, but also of things, and [...] we need signs, not merely to change our minds, but also to help our own thoughts»

[36] It is actually the foundation, in contemporary linguistics, of the *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*. But Leibniz did not write a full-fledge theory of language based on this insight; it was acknowledged and later developed by Christian Wolff and Johann Gottfried Herder. According to Michael Forster, Herder then passed it on to Hamann (see M. Forster, *Herder's Philosophy*, Oxford 2018, pp. 30ff), of whom the Romantics, specially Humboldt, would have recovered it. Walter Benjamin was an enthusiastic reader of Hamann, and it is through him that Benjamin supplemented his intuitions to engage with a version of a *Natursprache*, with sources in Böhme and Leibniz, as he makes clear with his direct citations in *GS* 2, pp. 147, 151 and 168.

[37] Leibniz himself acknowledges this when he writes in his notes: «For the play of characters can go far, and indeed goes far, up to the point that we could not think abstract things without the help of arbitrary characters» (*EB*, p. 97).

[38] Thomas Singer explains that during the Baroque, «[a] natural language was a language that could best express the nature of things. The actual spoken languages were considered to be the artificial and corrupt products of the misuse of words by the common people. These everyday languages were 'unnatural', for they obscured the order of things.» (Th. Singer, *Hieroglyphs, Real Characters, and the Idea of Natural Language in English Seventeenth Century Thought*, «Journal of the History of Ideas» 50/1, 1989, pp. 49-70. Singer uses here 'natural language' to refer to the German *Natursprache*.

[39] Leibniz was therefore hesitant. For example, in the *Dialogue*, after explaining his insight, he also writes: «For although characters are arbitrary, their use and connection have something which is not arbitrary, namely a certain analogy [*proportionem*] between characters and things, and the relations which different characters expressing the same thing have to each other. This analogy or relation [*proportio*] is the basis of truth. For the result is that, whether we apply one set of characters or another, the results will be the same, or equivalent, or correspond analogously.» (*G* VII, p. 192). It follows from this passage that Leibniz expects that the preservation of structure implicit in expression can withhold. But how accurately? *Proportionem* can be

for these qualities, at least partially, in Jacob Böhme's conception of an Adamic language.

The early-modern philosopher and mystic Jacob Böhme upheld the view that the original language of man was the language of nature [*Natursprache*]. Böhme proposed a complex hierarchy of linguistic concepts divided in three different levels. The first level of this *Natursprache* comprises the ensemble of God-written inscriptions, imprints or 'signatures', as a silent language of things in themselves[40]. The second level came upon when Adam, hearing the 'signatures' accurately, bestowed names upon things and animals in accordance with their essence, form, and properties, providing them with an audible dimension[41]. The multiplication of tongues prompted by the fall of that emblematic tower marks the third level of this linguistic ontology. For Böhme, spoken languages are degraded – or fallen – yet sensualistic[42], i.e., there remains in them a latent component (sonority, proportion, quality and shape) that keeps a close connection or co-naturalness with the things or the world they signify. In this sense, the language of nature has an onomatopoetic structure, and can be followed in the rhythm of words, in the hissing of the wind passing through the branches of trees, or on the roar of the storm: these are all forms of divine revelation. Since we human beings were endowed with 'signatures' of our own, we should be able to read the corresponding essence for each thing, because we are made in the image of God. Thus, by knowing ourselves, we would know the essence of all beings[43]. Therefore, even if the inner meaning of things was lost and the Adamic language was scattered over the multiplicity of tongues, Böhme thought it was possible to retrieve the original language of nature[44].

Böhme's conception had a deep impact on Baroque culture, it shaped a specific conception of the world and went on to influence the early German Romantics[45]. Following Böhme's thesis, the Baroque understanding of language

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translated as 'analogy', 'similitude', even 'correspondence', and of course 'proportion' (here with mathematical implications), and every type could be said to perform differently. Leibniz's double standard has puzzled scholars, and there are conflicting interpretations in this regard.

[40] Böhme writes: «the signature or form is no spirit [*Geist*], but the receptacle or container of the spirit, wherein it lies; for the signature stands in the essence, and is as a lute that stands silently, and is indeed a dumb thing that is neither heard nor understood.» J. Böhme, *De Signatura Rerum*, Amsterdam 1635 (henceforth *SR*), p. 10. In his own theory, Benjamin refers to this inherent silence of the world as the way in which nature mourns (see Benjamin *GS* 2, p. 155).

[41] Böhme *MM*, 35, 12, p. 249.

[42] Böhme *MM,* 35, 68, p. 260.

[43] As Losonsky argues: «[Böhme's] sensible language of nature is an expression of the language of God that human beings have in their understanding, and that allows them in principle to understand the true nature of things. In other words, the sensible Adamic language is made possible because there is a nonsensible, mental language of thought, which has crucial Adamic qualities: it is a causally powerful language that is natural, innate, universal, and accurate.» (Cit. p. 526).

[44] For example, as he suggests in chapter 18 from his *Aurora* (1612), Frankfurt/Leipzig 1992, pp. 338-ff.

[45] As Winfrid Menninghaus writes, «The theory of a language of paradise and the *topos* of an Adamitic name-giving through and since Jacob Böhme has turned, primarily in the Ger-

developed a continuous tension between spoken languages and the expressive language of nature. For Leibniz, this tension was enhanced by the fragmentation of the linguistic medium into its material, sensory elements: its sounds and its graphic characters[46].

One of the main traits of the language of nature is the peculiar form in which meaning is attained. Words are here not the primary units, since its principal aim is not the communication of contents or ideas. The relationship between words and things, or between ideas, is rather represented or expressed – in characters, emblems, or musical notations – through ordered sequences where letters could as well mingle with images and other pictorial forms. Under this understanding, the Baroque – as Benjamin puts it – emancipated language from meaning[47]. Meaning was instead concocted through the construction of visual picto-hieroglyphic complexes that could express ideas in the detailed order of their component parts.

But contrary to Böhme, Leibniz did not argue for the factual existence of an originary language of things, and he consistently rejected its possible reconstitution[48]. Nevertheless, Leibniz maintained a commitment to a form of Adamic language in his idea to develop a philosophical language – one that would adequately render the relations not only between things and words, but also between ideas – as well as in his artificially developed *ars characteristica*, a system that would be able to express unequivocally discoveries in nature and events in their truthful being. As Leibniz writes: «the true real characteristic that I conceive must be thought as one of the most skilled instruments of the human mind, with an invincible and clear capacity for discovery, memory and judgment.»[49] In that sense, the universal characteristic which he strived to developed, and which served as the basis for his infinitesimal calculus, was envisioned as an answer to the restrictions of human languages, to their arbitrariness, where the naturally ordered and innate realm of ideas could thrive and expand its capacities without the obligation to serve as a vehicle to communicate any given content[50].

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man-speaking space, into a medium of reflection or object of speculation of a broad and powerful tradition regarding a mystical language.» (W. Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, Frankfurt 1995, p. 43).

[46] For instance, Leibniz held the thesis that spoken languages derive from sounds (*NA* II, p. 4). A good account on his special relation to Chinese characters and Chinese culture in Y. Ting-Lai, *Leibniz and Chinese Thought*, in *Leibniz: Mysticism and Religion*, ed. A. Coudert, Berlin 1998, pp. 136-168.

[47] As Benjamin writes: «In the [Baroque] anagrams, the onomatopoetic phrases and many other kinds of linguistic tricks, the word, the syllable and the sound, emancipated from any traditional connection to meaning, strut as a thing that should be exploited for allegorical purposes.» (*GS* I, p. 381).

[48] See *GP* VII, p. 204-5; *C* p. 151, or the suggestion in *NA* II p. 74.

[49] *G* VIII, p. 7.

[50] Leibniz seems to have two approaches regarding his research on language. On one side, his observations on actual spoken languages, which he regards in their richness but also far from his own metaphysical conception (and in that sense, as fallen languages); on the other, the possibility to create a new semantic system that would reinforce his whole monadology. As Daniel Rutherford writes, these two sides «are represented, on the one hand, by the many sketches and

Leibniz constructed then a written language of substitutable characters, or symbols, arbitrary in themselves, but which maintained an expressive relationship to meaning through the internal relationships of their structure. In that sense, it would be non-arbitrary inasmuch as it could preserve a stable and continuous relation between an idea and a character, grounded on the actual properties of the expressed. Additionally, abstract thinking would be strengthened. For this universal characteristic, complex ideas would be resolved through rearrangements of their simple parts, by assigning characters to the most primitive elements, so that more complex convolutes would reflect in their own constitution the operation of more complex characters[51]. Even though this was a written language, the expressive correspondents between sounds and words, or between words and script, would not be found in the communicative reduction of the written sign, but should be read as patterns that reflect the order of ideas. In other words, this language was prevented from serving as an instrument of communication from the start. A mute language, committed to describing objects and their interactions rather than to facilitating the transmission of human passions, vicissitudes and (possible) errors, Leibniz's characteristic aimed at being precise by fixing the relationship between things according to their natural, divine order. This was not the lost language of Adam, whose universality would guarantee an understanding between all individuals of the Earth, but a Promethean feat to enable a universal language of the intellect – much in line with a mathematical syntax– and in a direct connection to a divine understanding[52].

4. Benjamin's Writings on Language

It is possible to state beyond any doubt that Benjamin's conception of language – as well as his early epistemology, aesthetics, and political thinking– was influenced by his research on Leibniz, Böhme and the Baroque[53]. Actually, Benjamin added himself very little to those pre-established systems. More than a reorganization of many of their elements, his ideas on the linguistic domain are hardly original. As a matter of fact, the argument he displays in his text from 1916 on the origins of language barely makes any contribution to a linguistic inquiry[54],

plans associated with the notion of an ideal, artificial language – the 'universal characteristic'; and, on the other, by numerous historical and philological investigations of natural languages, many of them directed towards uncovering the common roots of a multitude of human languages. On the face of it, there seems to be a tension between the aims and assumptions of these two very different approaches to the subject of language.» (D. Rutherford, cit., p. 224).
[51] *G* VII, p. 205ff.
[52] A fact that was not impervious to Benjamin, who noticed the cunning connection between the monadology and the foundation of a system of calculus, as he mentions it in *GS* 1, p. 228.
[53] See note 14.
[54] The topic of the *Über die Sprache…* basically rearranges some premises laid down by the above mentioned authors. Moreover, the problem on the origins of language had been very often revisited by French and German philosophers after that era. Bonnot de Condillac wrote his *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* in 1746, where he dedicates a section to prove the

specifically towards the issue that Benjamin was defending – the possibility of a language of nature –, much less to a modernist linguistic theory like the one that was being developed by Saussure at the time[55]. Benjamin's important insights lie elsewhere, in the search for a theory of language able to bring closer the opposition between man and world. In that direction, he knew that the epoch was changing, that he would have to develop his ideas thoroughly[56], and this initial essay remained unpublished during his lifetime. However, Benjamin was also aware of the definitive radicality of his own position (an anachronism set to function as a progressive disturbance within the established 'bourgeois' order) and little by little, but steadily throughout his career, interlaced a series of texts on the same topic[57]. This became a program in its own right, in which he could sustain the claim to a secular form of theology with which to structure a disruptive and critical form of thinking. In fact, in the *Program towards a coming philosophy* (1917), he stated how this whole philosophical agenda had a firm tenet on a specific conception on language, but distanced itself from the Positivist/Neokantian path to advance it in a mathematical form (therefore, in a way, from Leibniz as well, at least in this issue):

[Kant's insight that] all philosophical knowledge has its sole expression in language and not in formulas and numbers has completely receded. In the end, however, this fact should assert itself as the decisive one, and for its sake the systematic supremacy of philosophy over all sciences as well as over mathematics must ultimately be asserted. A concept of it produced by reflecting on the linguistic essence of knowledge will create a corresponding concept of experience, which will also include areas whose true systematic classification Kant did not foresee[58].

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animal origins of language. Herder wrote his *Treatise on the origin of language* [*Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*] in 1771 as an entry to the contest organized by the Berlin Academy of Sciences two years earlier. Eight years later, the same academy organized another similar contest under the auspices of Friedrich Schelling, who wrote himself an essay (*Preliminary remarks on the question of the origin of language*) [*Vorbemerkungen zu der Frage über den Ursprung der Sprache*], and where the prize was awarded to Jacob Grimm's *On the origins of language* [*Über den Ursprung der Sprache*] (1851). Many other German philosophers, from Schleiermacher to Humboldt, contributed to this discussion. In this sense, the topic Benjamin was dealing with was already part of a very idiosyncratic philosophical tradition.

[55] Ferdinand de Saussure dictated his famous *Cours de linguistique générale* in the University of Geneva from 1906 to 1911. His most recognized contribution was the separation of the linguistic sign in signifier and signified, in an insight that profited from the arbitrariness of the sign, and therefore was opposite to the Benjaminian efforts. The first German edition from Saussure's book dates from 1913.

[56] In a letter to Scholem on the 11th of November 1916, he wrote: «With the title *Über die Sprache* […] you can see a certain systematic intention, which for me also makes very clear the fragmentary nature of [my] thoughts, because I am still unable to grasp a lot of it» (*GS* 2, p. 931).

[57] The texts on language span his whole work, and besides the first essay from 1916 include very prominently the *Prologue* to the *Trauerspiel* book (1916-1928), *The Task…* (1923), and the opuscules on the *Doctrine of Similitude* and *On the Mimetic Capacity* (1933). However, the topic was explored as the main subject in various other fragments and shorter works.

[58] *GS* 2, p. 168.

Consequently, Benjamin worked to achieve a theory of a *Natursprache*, but one that would not resolve itself into a mathematical system aimed at preserving things in their kingdom of objectivity, nor a version with which to attempt a recovery of the lost Adamic language. His approach appears to strike a balance between these two alternatives, imbued with the melancholic *pathos* of the definitively gone[59], but constantly contemplating the grandiosity of the – impossible, irrecoverable – divine in its traces, crumbles and ruins. The text *Über die Sprache…* sets the main elements of such a theory. And there he asks: «What does language communicate?» The answer to this apparent conundrum leads directly to the core of his considerations on this topic: «It communicates the spiritual being that corresponds to it. It is fundamental to know that this spiritual being communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language.»[60] He then proposes an example:

The language of this lamp, for instance, does not communicate the lamp (for the spiritual essence of the lamp, insofar as it can be communicated, is by no means the lamp itself), but rather: the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in *expression* [*Ausdruck*][61].

In this sense, the structural movement that is realized as such in speaking, or in the being of words, beyond their determination by any «verbal content»[62], but which at the same time is not a mere formal system of rules, and transmits or communicates somehow a particular entity, a so-called spiritual being [*geistiges Wesen*] – this is the peculiar synthesis of a philosophy of language to which Benjamin refers. It is the exposition of his *Natursprache*, and the typical elements play here their role: the episode of the fall of Babel[63], the Adamic logic

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[59] Melancholy was thus the distinctive emotional *pathos* of the undecided, as Benjamin had also learned from Baroque culture. As he writes: «With the characteristic attitude of counter-Reformation reaction, the type formation in German *Trauerspiel* follows the medieval school image of melancholy everywhere. But the typical and fundamentally different forms of this drama – style and language – are inconceivable without that bold twist with which the Renaissance speculations perceived in the features of weeping contemplation the reflection of a distant light that shimmered towards it from the bottom of its immersion.» (*GS* 1, p. 334). From Benjamin's own explanation, melancholy seems to be the experiential state of mind that works as an optimal prerequisite to epistemic, aesthetic and even political illuminations.

[60] *GS* 2, p. 142.

[61] *Ibid.*

[62] *GS* 2, p. 143.

[63] As David Kaufmann explains, in Benjamin's discussion of language of 1916 «judgment is a mark of the *fall* into human speech; justice and the discriminations that attend on judgment do not partake of the divine which is more often than not figured by Benjamin as a form of redemptive violence» (D. Kaufmann, *Beyond Use, within Reason: Adorno, Benjamin and the Question of Theology*, «New German Critique», 83, 2001, pp. 151-173, esp. p. 155). Following Kaufmann's insight, the annulment of judgment (which, when related to language implies the capacity to decide 'truth' from 'false', according to an analogy presented in the *Zur Kritik* essay, *GS* 2: 196) leads to the redemption of language. The same principle of undecidability leads in the *Zur Kritik* to the deposition of the law [*Entsetzung des Rechts*] as we will see.

of naming the animals and the things in the world[64], the glimpse of a redemptive revelation of the divine kingdom[65]. Moreover, the idea of a spiritual being of language reminds one of the formal research by Humboldt in his notion of an «inner linguistic form» [*innere Sprachform*][66], who in turn developed the idea from Herder's notion of an «inner language» [*innere Sprache*][67] and Shaftesbury's «inward forms»[68]. If a parallel reading is here possible (Benjamin did not leave any quotations on the text[69]), the philosopher would be referring then to the

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[64] Benjamin writes: «Man communicates his own spiritual essence […] when he names things.» (*GS* 2, p. 143). W. Menninghaus comments this statement thus: «the 'meaning' of this mystical theological sentence does not rely on a mimesis between language and words, but on the expe-rience of a third one: in a relation of expression [*Ausdrucksrelation*], a form of mimesis between the speaker and the language in its formative principle, its inner form.» (Menninghaus, cit. p. 20).

[65] The repetition of biblical motifs does not imply that Benjamin is looking for a re-theologiza-tion of language. As he himself explains: «If in the next lines the essence of language as based on the first *Genesis* chapter is considered, the objective is not to pursue the interpretation of the Bible, nor should the Bible at this point be objectively used as a revealed truth for reflection […]» (*GS* 2, p. 147).

[66] The notion of inner linguistic forms in Humboldt is more a cue than a formal concept, but it refers to the form in which language ensues from a work of the mind, as a process, a rhythm, an impetus. It can be compared in contemporary linguistics to the *Generative grammar* proposed by Chomsky. (For an analysis on this, see H. W. Schaft, *Das Verfahren der Sprache. Humboldt gegen Chomsky*. Paderborn 1994, esp. pp. 227-261). Humboldt referred to it also as a *typus*; in this sense, he writes that language «is more than an instinct of intellectuality, for it does not imply the occurrence of spiritual life, but it consists in life itself, in its τύπος, and its functions are the organs of the mind, like the formation of muscle fibers, the blood's circulation, the ramification of the nerves of the body's organs.» (W. v. Humboldt, *Versuch einer Analyse der Mexikanischen Sprache* (1821), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin 1968, IV, p. 249). Or in this other quote: «Language would allow no invention, if its τύπος were not already part of human understanding.» (W. v. Humboldt, *Über das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung, ibid.*, IV, p. 14). Through the name τύπος, the idea of inner linguistic forms came to Goethe, as he develops it in his concept of the organism and his doctrine of metamorphosis. Goethe uses it to describe the ideal archetypal image of a species, the conceptual archetype that acts as entelechy in every living being. The type of plants is the ur-plant; the type of animals is the ur-animal. (See here Goethe's *Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen*, in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke* I, Munich 1998).

[67] Herder writes in his *Treatise* from 1771: «These sighs, these sounds are language. There is then a language of sensation that is an immediate law of nature.» (Herder, *Abhandlung…* Stuttgart 1966, p. 6).

[68] Shaftesbury's notion of «inward form» is also related to the celebrated German concept of *Bildung*. For an outlook on the reception of Shaftsbury among the early Romantics in the German-speaking world, see R. Horlacher, *Bildungstheorie vor der Bildungstheorie – Die Shaft-esbury-Rezeption in Deutschland und der Schweiz im 18. Jahrhundert*, Würzburg 2004.

[69] However, Benjamin was reading Humboldt around those years. He would later (between 1925-1928) plan a text on him (*Reflexionen zu Humboldt*), in which he writes a clear statement that he was aware of Humboldt's importance in these issues: «Humboldt speaks of the fine and never fully comprehensible interrelation between *expression* and thought» (*GS* 6, p. 27). The book was never written and only scattered notes survive.

forces and energies of language[70], as well as to its capacity to serve as a reservoir for the experiences of a linguistic community[71].

In any case, even if Benjamin's development in linguistics is not completely original, he instilled elements into his philosophy of language that are *sui generis* and more proper of a *pragmatics* (and in that sense, close to his notion of experience, as he implied on the Kant reference quoted above). Three foundations of this theory are 1) the action of continuous transformation, as a translation between linguistic, but also non-linguistic, entities[72]; 2) the subject that ensues from that action – not only that of a translator, but also that of a poet able to read correspondences and relations, a collector, an allegorist, a materialist historian, etc.; and 3) the object-tools with which these subjects work, i.e. those which are the focus or outcome of the action: an allegory, a quote, a dialectical image…[73]

5. Towards a Critique II. The Function of Divine Violence

We now come back to our point of departure: Benjamin's *Zur Kritik…* essay. The interpretative task is to illuminate how Benjamin intended the introduction of the category of divine violence. As he stated, that form of violence *manifests* itself, it is therefore *expressive*. As we recalled, Benjamin explicitly gives the example of a sudden burst of anger. Divine violence appears then as metonymic, yet it is also allegoric (as against the metaphoric and functionalized form implicit in mythic violence). As an allegory – following Benjamin's understanding– divine violence is an abstraction. This means that it is not a trait of the real, it is not a semiotic sign, it is pre-logic and pre-linguistic (in the modernist sense, or «a faculty of the linguistic spirit itself» according to Benjamin), a mediation between the physical world and the mind. As such, divine violence is irreducible to meaning and

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[70] As Humboldt writes: «[*Language*] is no work (*Ergon*), but an activity (*Energeia*)», (*Einleitung zum Kawi-work*, in W. v Humboldt, *Schriften zur Sprache*, Stuttgart 1973, pp. 30-211, (henceforth as *KW*), esp. p. 36).

[71] A passage from Benjamin's text *Über die Sprache…* makes this clear: «the German language, for instance, is by no means the expression for everything that we can – supposedly– express through it, but it is the direct expression of what is communicated in itself. This 'self' is a spiritual being» (*GS* 2, p. 141). Communication does not refer thus to the exchange of predicative fixed contents, but to non-predicative processes of representation and understanding, for which the primordial semantics of words and sentences existing in each language provides a vast 'fund', as he would later state on his *Doctrine of the similar* (*GS* 2, p. 209), following here again Humboldt (see *KW*, p. 56) and Herder (see cit. p. 94).

[72] Translation is for Benjamin the action in which one deals directly with the 'spiritual being' of linguistic and non-linguistic entities, by transfusing their force from one form to another. In *The Task…*, Benjamin would develop the idea for textual translations in this guise: «In the end, translation is useful for *expressing* the innermost relationship between languages.» (*GS* 4, p. 12).

[73] A full-fledge analysis of these elements would imply an assessment of the whole of Benjamin's work, a task that lies beyond the possibilities of this article. But a working definition of an allegory, especially for our context, as Benjamin understands it, can be found in his *Trauerspiel* book, where he writes: «Allegory lives in abstractions, as abstraction, as a faculty of the linguistic spirit itself» (*GS* 1, p. 407).

detached from causal connections; it implies a certain continuity between the world and the linguistic substance, a naturalized linguistic correlation.

Fairly relevant to grasp Benjamin's use of divine violence as an allegory is Hegel's own characterization of this trope. In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel defines it as «the abstraction of a universal idea which acquires only the *empty form* of subjectivity»[74]. For Hegel, if these abstractions have meaning, it is only because predication is ascribed to them, that is, allegories lack specific individuality, but they are determinate (i.e. specific predicates of the grammatical subject have to be enunciated), and as such, recognizable [*bestimmte und erst durch diese Bestimmtheit erkennbar*][75]. Hegel had a negative view of these forms, which to him were frigid and sterile [*frostig und kahl*]; he grouped them together with similes, parables, didactic poems and epigrams which were all, according to him, symbolic art forms from a receding past. Working through comparisons, all of these were «inferior genres», which «instead of presenting things or meanings according to their adequate reality, *merely* present them as an image or as a parable»[76]. These same qualities were precisely the reason why Benjamin valued them highly. For him, allegories and similar art forms from the Baroque offered the possibility to work beyond a semiotically closed domain, altering the instrumentalized sphere of meaning altogether.

As allegorical, divine violence turns useless any scheme to control it. As a clear expression of an uncontrollable force outside the semiotic reduction, divine violence deposes (*entsetzen*) the law and the legal system. The moment the possibility of a complete deposition (*Entsetzung*) is strained to its limit occurs on the encounter with nature itself, with the recognition of the phenomena it expresses – the unforeseeable outbursts of unrestrained violence[77]. To appreciate how this approach functions, we need to understand how the problem is framed. We know Benjamin contrasts the term *divine* with what he labels as *mythic*, and the opposition seems to be forthright:

If mythical violence is law-positing, divine violence is law-destroying [*rechts-vernichtend*]; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine violence only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal while bloody-less[78].

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[74] G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden, vol. 13, Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*, Frankfurt am Main 1970, pp. 511-512.

[75] *Ibid.* p. 512.

[76] *Ibid.* p. 488.

[77] There is a parallelism here with the notion of *catastrophe* that Benjamin was investigating on the *Trauerspiel* book, as an acceptance of the inevitable drift of the world. As he writes: «Because it is antithetical to the historical ideal of the restoration, [the Baroque] stands with the idea of catastrophe. And it is on these antithetics that the theory of the state of emergency is coined. […] The religious man of the baroque holds so firmly attached to the world because he feels that he is drifting towards a cataract with it» (*GS* 1, p. 246).

[78] *GS* 2, p. 199.

Mythic violence is identified with the instrumentalization of the phenomenon of violence to fit a positivist scheme and fulfill the means-ends structure. In its continuous cycle of law-positing and law-preserving enactments, mythic violence provides the basic stance for every legend of transgression and revenge, as well as for every struggle for recognition. In this sense, mythic violence is not only an explanation and a threat, but also an axiom that yields its own conditions of possibility and delineates its own field: it is a self-fulfilling narrative[79]. But divine violence does not refer to another form of existing violence, one that would replace (*ersetzen*) the mythical one and establish itself as primordial. Divine violence is only different from the mythic with regard to the role they play to sustain a given idea of justice and of the law. In other words: there is not an intrinsic ontological difference between both 'types' of violence[80], but only an hermeneutical distinction that leads to two disjunctive political realities[81].

Accordingly, the notion of divine violence is an interpretative antidote against the notion of law as myth that has very important and concrete effects. The first one is that this approach elaborates on the proximity and certainty of violence trying to clear it *beyond fear*. Benjamin does not imply a simplistic answer nor argues that the intrinsically good in human beings would somehow outweigh the maliciousness of despots and tyrants. Just as certain as the end of a human life, *violence will be*. Any promise to the deterrence of violence will necessarily be proven wrong. So with the notion of divine violence as expression of a meta-semiotic domain, the role and value of that violence for political *afformances* is

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[79] As Bettina Menke writes: «the 'mythical violence' is the 'juridical fiction', the necessary fiction for its ungrounded foundation [*grundlose (Be)Gründung*], which it makes possible and dissimulates as an ungrounded grounding act of positing: the law dissimulates in the 'juridical fiction' – in which it at once posits and preserves – the observation of its functioning, of its own condition of possibility. It is a mythical forgetfulness.» (B. Menke, *Benjamin vor dem Gesetz: Die Kritik der Gewalt in der Lektüre Derridas*, ed. A. Haverkamp *Gewalt und Gerechtigkeit. Derrida-Benjamin*, Frankfurt 1994, pp. 217-275, esp. p. 221).

[80] As there certainly exists, for example, between an originary, foundational form of violence that institutes a ritual (as a one-time, spontaneous and inaugural event), and the ritualized, repetitive violence that follows (programmed and staged sequels) as a memorial of that first foundational act, such as René Girard describes in his *Le violence et le sacré*, Paris 1972, p. 154.

[81] To miss this difference may lead to puzzling interpretations, which would mistake an 'objective' description of a phenomenon with its exegesis. Such is the case when, on his comment of Benjamin, Žižek laments that «there is no 'objective' criteria enabling us to identify an act of violence as divine; the same act that, to an external observer, is merely an outburst of violence can be divine for those engaged in it – there is no big Other guaranteeing its divine nature; the risk of reading and assuming it as divine is fully the subject's own.» (S. Žižek, *Violence*, New York 2008, p. 200). Žižek's comment is certainly misleading, for his irony prevents him from seeing that (1) it is precisely the act of interpretation that assigns the value to a violent event as a 'punishable' act; (2) that there is always already an interpretation of 'human nature' behind legal positivism, as a radical individual isolationism ('everybody is responsible for their own actions') and (3) that behind this interpretation (a reading of the legal text that is 'reality'), myth is always already the last-resource warrant of the law. To set the discussion in terms of objective/subjective dualities, as Žižek does, obscures the whole problem of how the semantic mechanism of the law is structured.

definitely incorporated[82]. For along this field, natural (or naturalized) violence is continually dispossessed of a transcendental meaning: its occurrence does not follow a logic, it eludes causation or other explanations, it escapes any political frame. Moreover, without a hidden or encrypted motive, human beings are free from reckoning about a meaningless causation, free from providing answers, free from 'guilt'. If violence is not symbolized as revenge, nor as a price to be paid, nor as a response symbolizing one's own fate, human beings are detached from its interpretation: there is no sin. There remains only a demand for a deep understanding ensuing from our own participation on its flow. If there is no 'why?' to be answered, piously investigated, violence might occur, but human beings can remain detached, expiated, liberated from the endless hermeneutical task that its proper clarification would imply.

Benjamin gets one clear lesson from the Baroque and from Leibniz's metaphysics: since divine violence is all around us (*waltend*), fear [*Furcht*] is an irrelevant response[83], it is redundant and even irrational, and while it might help order one's own inner trepidations[84], it should remain useless for a political regime[85].

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[82] Werner Hamacher has fittingly described 'afformances' as possible pauses, ellipses, interruptions, displacements... «The afformative is the ellipsis which silently accompanies any act and which may silently interrupt any speech act.» (W. Hamacher, Werner, *Afformative, Strike*, «Cardozo Law Review» 13/4, 1991, pp. 1133-1157, esp. 1139 n. 12).

[83] As it is implied in *GS* 2 p. 200.

[84] On the *One-way Street* essay (1928), Benjamin will bring together again the idea of happiness with the ability to overcome fear of oneself: «To be happy means to be able to perceive without fear of oneself.» [*Glücklich sein heißt ohne Schrecken seiner selbst innewerden können.*] (*GS* 4, p. 113).

[85] This is the hermeneutic stand at which the notion of 'fear' is brought in *Zur Kritik*, but the idea kept playing a major role in Benjamin's political thinking. Its most finished development acquired another form under the auspices of Kierkegaardian *anxiety*. Benjamin's adoption of the Kierkegaardian terminology in this respect is so entrenched that very little more than an up-front comparison with Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety* from 1844 is here needed. Certainly, all the analysis that have ensued out of the fascination with Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* have acknowledged the importance of the mechanism of time operating in it, but they have mostly eluded how a sense of fear and vulnerability lies also at its foundation. In that sense, Benjamin clearly snatches the affection of fear away from the sovereign power, to restore it back to the subject, who can then redirect it for an emancipatory agenda. This is very clearly emphasized as a common objective by Adorno in a letter to Benjamin some years later: «The objective of the revolution is the abrogation of anxiety [*Der Zweck der Revolution ist die Abschaffung der Angst*]. For that, we do not need to fear this fear, and we do not have to ontologize it» (*GS* 1, p. 1005).