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# Language and History in Benjamin

**Giorgio Agamben**

Among the preparatory notes for Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, the following is repeated in various forms:

The Messianic world is the world of a total and integral actuality. The first instance of universal history occurs there. Today this term can only denote a type of esperanto which cannot be realized until the confusion of Babel is cleared up. It presupposes a language into which every text can be wholly translated, whether it is written in a living or a dead tongue. Or rather, it is itself this language; not in written form, but as it is joyously acted out. This celebration is purified of all rite or song, and its language is the very idea of a universally comprehended prose, just as the language of birds is comprehended by the children born on Sunday.<sup>1</sup>

At first this messianic conflation of language and history, of linguistic and historical categories, may seem surprising. Benjamin writes that the history of redeemed humanity is the only universal history; but it is one and the same with its language. Universal

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[Translated from the Italian by Karen Pinkus]

history presupposes—in fact it constitutes—a universal language which puts an end to the confusion of tongues. The figure of this language of redeemed humanity is not written, but joyously celebrated. It is the idea of prose. “Liberated prose,” as we read in one version, “which has broken free of the chains of writing,”<sup>2</sup> and it is embraced by all men as, according to a popular Christian legend, the *Sonntagskinder*, children born on Sunday, are able to understand the language of birds through supernatural powers.

In the following pages we will offer a reading of this text in which Benjamin, during an inspired period, shaped one of his most profound arguments.

The conflation of historic and linguistic categories in question here was not always as unusual as it may seem to the modern reader. During the Middle Ages this notion was formulated in even more radical terms: “History pertains to grammar” (*haec disciplina scil. historia, we find in the Etymologies of Isidore of Seville, ad gramaticam pertinet*).<sup>3</sup> In the writings of Augustine, where Isidore’s statement found its proper authority, this pertinence is explained in terms of the necessary reference of every historical process of handing down [*tramandamento*] to the domain of the “letter.” After having passed through the “infancy of grammar” (*quaedam gramaticae infantia*), from the invention of alphabetic characters to the identification of the parts of discourse, Augustine continues:

Thus grammar was completed, but since within its very name it declared itself an expression of letters, since it is called in Latin, literature, it happened that whenever something memorable was to be written down (*litteris mandaretur*), it necessarily pertained to grammar. Grammar was thus linked to history, a discipline with one name but infinite content, manifold and full of more sorrow than joy or truth, a ponderous affair not so much for historians but for grammarians.<sup>4</sup>

If history is presented here in a conventionally gloomy light, as a “ponderous affair for grammarians more than for historians,” this is because Augustine, with his acute penetration of the nature of language, defines grammar not only in the strict sense (the synchronic analysis of structures), but also in terms of the infinite dimension of historical transmittal (*litteris mandaretur*). The letter, the gram, is for Augustine, before all else, an historical element. But in what sense?

The Augustinian conception had its foundation in the historical reflection on language as it was still expressed, for example, in Varro’s great treatise on the Latin language. This tradition clearly distinguished two fields within language: names (or pure

denomination, *impositio*, *quemadmodum vocabula rebus essent imposita*), and discourse, which derives from the first category as “a river from a spring.”<sup>5</sup>

Because man can only receive the names which proceed him in this process of handing down, access to the foundation of language is mediated and conditioned by history. Speaking man does not invent words, nor do they emit from him like an animal voice: they come down to him, as Varro says, *descending*, that is within an historical process of handing down. Names can only be given over, betrayed [*traditi*]; the speech act is the object of an *ars*, subject to a technical, rational knowledge. It is of no importance here whether names are conceived as a divine gift or a human invention. What is significant is that in every case, the origin of names escapes the speaker.

With this decomposition of the linguistic field into two hierarchically distinct levels, we find ourselves in the presence of a theory which is so durable and central that it reappears in perfectly analogous terms in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Here names are in fact defined as primitive signs (*Urzeichen*), whose significance must be explained before we can understand them.<sup>6</sup> With propositions, on the other hand, understanding is achieved without preliminary explanation. (We ought to note that here the character of the human access to language is such that each speech act always presupposes a field of names only penetrable historically, in a “it is said this way” which is actually a “it was said this way.”)

And this primarily historical foundation of language, resisting any purely technical, rational penetration, is expressed in a passage from Dante's *Convivio* through an astronomical simile, as the “shadow” of grammar. Here, Dante compares grammar with the sphere of the moon, because of “the shadow which is in it, which is nothing else but the scattered and vaporous materials of its body, where the rays of the sun cannot penetrate or be reflected as they can in other parts.” Likewise, Dante says of grammar, “because of its infinity, the rays of reason cannot reach it, and this is especially true for words.”<sup>7</sup>

Reason cannot be the base names (*li vocaboli*), and it cannot carry them through because, as we have seen, names come to Reason historically, descending. This infinite “descent” of names is history. Language always anticipates this, and we need only consider speaking man at his origin, carving it out from the infinite towards the past, and at the same time, towards the future of an infinite descension such that thought can never end in language. And this is the immedicable “shadow” of grammar, of obscurity inherent in language at its origins and which provides the foundation—in the necessary coincidence of history and grammar—for

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the historicity of man. History is the figure of the shadow which veils human access to the field of names: history is in lieu of names. The transparency of language, the groundlessness of every speech act, is the basis for both theology and history. As long as man has no access to the foundation of language, there will be a handing down of names; and as long as there is a handing down, there will be history and destiny.

The coincidence of language and history, which emerges in Benjamin, ceases, in this light, to appear surprising. Man's historical condition is inseparable from his condition as speaker, and is inscribed in the very modality of his access to language, originally signaled by a split. But how does Benjamin construe this cohesion of language and history, of linguistic and historical categories? In a text from 1916 (*The Significance of Language in the Trauerspiel and Tragedy*), the cohesion is expressed in a flagrant abbreviation: "History," we find here, "is born simultaneously with meaning in human language."<sup>8</sup> In this piece, suddenly, the cohesion of language and history is not total: in fact, it coincides with a split on the linguistic level, that is, with the falling out of the word (*Wort*) from its "pure sentimental life" (*reines Gefühlsleben*) in which it exists as the "pure sound of sentiment," to the sphere of meaning (*Bedeutung*): "in the middle of this journey [towards pure sound] nature sees itself betrayed by language, and this immense inhibition of sentiment becomes an act of mourning."<sup>9</sup> History and meaning produce each other, but they arise from a so-called pre-historic condition of language, one in which the dimension of meaning has not yet emerged, but which amounts to the purely sentimental life of the word.

In the essay *On Language in General and the Language of Men* (1916), the decomposition of language into two fields is clearly articulated in a mythologem founded on biblical exegesis. Here, as in Medieval thought, the original field of language is that of names, exemplified, however, according to the story of Genesis, in Adamic denomination. What Benjamin terms here "pure language" (*reine Sprache*) or the language of names (*Namenssprache*) is not, however, what we, according to an increasingly more diffuse conception, are accustomed to consider as a language: that is, the signifying word, as a means of communication which transmits a message from one subject to another. Such a definition is explicitly refuted by Benjamin as a "bourgeois concept of language," whose "inconsistency and emptiness" he means to demonstrate. Faced with this, the pure language of names stands as an example of a concept of language which "knows no means, no object, no addressee of communication." The name, as "the most intimate essence of language itself," is that "through which nothing is

communicated and in which language communicates itself absolutely." In the name, the spiritual essence which communicates itself is language. Because of this, Benjamin can still define the name as "the language of language (where the genitive does not express the means but the medium)."<sup>10</sup>

The status of this Adamic language is, therefore, that of a word which communicates nothing beyond itself, and in which, therefore, spiritual essence and linguistic essence coincide. Such a language, in fact, has no content, it does not communicate objects through signifieds, but rather it is perfectly transparent with regard to itself: "Language has no content. As communication, language conveys a spiritual being, that is, a communicability pure and simple."<sup>11</sup> Because of this, in pure language, the problem of the unsayable which characterizes human language does not exist (as "contrast between the uttered and the utterable on one hand, and the unsayable and the unuttered on the other"<sup>12</sup>). Here, philosophy of language has its point of contact with religion in the concept of revelation, which does not know the unsayable.

The original sin which banished man from the Garden is, before all else, the fall from this perfectly transparent language of nonsignifying names to the signifying word as a means of exterior communication: "The word should communicate something beyond itself," writes Benjamin. In fact,

This is the original sin of the linguistic spirit. Inasmuch as man leaves behind the pure language of names, he makes of language a means (from an inadequate knowledge), and thus also, at least in part, a mere sign: and later this results in the confusion of tongues.<sup>13</sup>

It is this fallen condition of language, ratified by the Babelic confusion of tongues, which the essay of 1921 on the *Work of the Translator* presents in the perspective of messianic redemption. Here, the multiplicity of historical languages is captured in its tension with that pure language which the essay of 1916 presented as the paradisiacal origin and which now appears as the sole agreed upon meaning for all languages. "Every overarching tie between languages," Benjamin writes,

consists in the fact that for each individual instance, taken as a total entity, one unique thing is understood. But this thing is not accessible in any one of the individual languages, only in the totality of their meanings which become fused together as pure language.<sup>14</sup>

This integrated unity remains, within individual languages, as a potential waiting to harmonize with all languages in that which

Benjamin terms the "messianic end of their history." Just as history moves towards its messianic fulfillment, so the linguistic movement as a whole moves towards "the final stage, definitive and decisive, of every linguistic structure."<sup>15</sup> The work of the philosopher, like that of the translator, is in fact this "description" and the "premonition" of this one true language which attempts to "expose itself" and to "constitute itself" in the development of languages. At the end of the essay, this pure language is decisively figured as a "word without expression," which is liberated from the weight and the alienation of sense:

To free it from sense, to make the symbolized from the symbolizing itself, to reobtain the pure language forged from linguistic movement, this is the single and powerful capacity of translation. In this pure language, which no longer means anything (*nichts mehr meint*) and no longer explains anything (*nicht mehr ausdrückt*), but which, as an expressionless and generative word, is the agreed upon meaning—in this language all communication, all sense and all intentionality reach a sphere in which they are destined to extinguish themselves.<sup>16</sup>

How are we to understand this "inexpressive word," this pure language in which all communication and all sense are extinguished? How can we conceive of—because this and nothing less than this is the problem at this point in our thought—a word which no longer means, which no longer is destined for the historical handing down of a signified? And in what sense does this word—which necessarily cancels out the Babelic confusion of tongues—provide us with a model of a universal language of redeemed humanity which "is immediately understood by all men as the language of birds is understood by the children born on Sunday"? How can man speak purely, how can he understand the word, without the mediation of the signified?

All historical languages, Benjamin writes, mean [*vogliono dire*] pure language. It is the common sense (*das Gemeinte*), that which is meant in every language. But by itself it means nothing; in it, all sense and intentionality cease. We could say that *all languages want to say the word which does not mean* [*vogliono dire la parola che non vuole dire*].

Let us try to penetrate the paradox of this formulation of meaning. Benjamin states that "in each language taken as an entity, only one thing is understood, and this is not accessible in any of them by themselves, but only in the totality of their meanings when fused together."<sup>17</sup> That which remains unsayable and

unsaid in every language is, therefore, exactly that which it means and intends to say: the pure language, the inexpressive word. It is precisely this persistent unsaid of meaning which sustains, at the base, the significant tension between languages and their historical evolution. The field of names—whose distinction from discourse we saw as inaugurating the cohesion of history and language—is the meaning which languages hand down without ever succeeding in bringing it as such into speech: it is (and this is how the biblical myth of the fall of Edenic language should be understood) that which destines the various languages to their historical development. They signify, they have sense, because they mean [*vogliono dire*]; but what they mean—pure language—remains unsaid within them.

And so the relationship between the various historical languages and their one common feature remains dialectical: in order for the languages to express this point of intersection they would have to cease meaning to say it, that is, to hand themselves down in meaning: but this is exactly what they cannot do—at least not to the point of abolishing themselves—because this capacity is only accessible to the totality of linguistic meanings, that is, to their messianic end. Benjamin writes that “a solution, other than one which is temporary and contingent [on the estrangement of languages], an instantaneous and definitive solution to this estrangement, is prohibited to men, and is not, in any case, obtainable for the moment.”<sup>18</sup> This does not imply an infinite dialectic. Through mediation (as Benjamin wrote of religion, “the hidden seed of a higher language is germinating in the languages”) this task is possible and realizable. The inexpressive, universal language is “constituting” itself and “exposing” itself in the historical evolution of languages. This constitution, however, definitively extinguishes every linguistic meaning and eliminates the unsayable which destined it to historicity, and to signification. Inasmuch as the pure language is the only one which does not mean, but says, it is also the only one in which that “crystalline elimination of the unsayable in language,” which Benjamin invokes in a letter to Buber of 1916, can be realized. It is truly the “language of language,” which saves meaning in all languages. In its transparency, language can finally declare itself.

Now that we have noted the physiognomic characteristics of pure language, regardless of how paradoxical they may appear, how are we to represent them in relation to our initial proposition, concerning the universal language of messianic humanity?

Let us first attempt to construe this language according to a



hypothesis which Benjamin explicitly excludes, that is, as a sort of esperanto. The fact that esperanto expressed a messianic intention, even in its name, could not have escaped Benjamin (who, in one of the preparatory notes for the *Theses on the Concept of History*, writes that "universal history in its contemporary sense is always a sort of esperanto. It expresses the hopes of the human species just as well as the name of this universal language"<sup>19</sup>). In fact, the term "esperanto" signifies one who hopes, and it is the pseudonym under which the Polish-Jewish doctor Ludwig Zamenhof published his *Lingvo Internacia* in 1887, an exposition of the fundamentals of a universal language in which the author placed his hopes for an eternal and universal understanding between all people. The fact that he presented his language in messianic terms (that is, to use Benjamin's words, as a language "into which every text can be wholly translated, whether it is written in a living or a dead tongue") proceeded from his tenacious translation work, which culminated in the esperanto version of the Old Testament, published posthumously in London in 1926 (the same year in which Rosenzweig, along with Buber, was working out his German translation of the Bible).

How is esperanto constructed? It is founded on 4,413 roots culled from Indo-European languages (neo-Latin, for the most part), which form substantives with the suffix *-o*, adjectives with *-a*, and verbal infinitives with *-i*. From *skrib*, which indicates writing, esperanto has *skribo* (a writer), *skriba* (writerly), and *skribi* (to write). In other words, the grammatical simplification and regularization of historical languages which leaves unchanged the fundamental conception of language as a system of signs centering around signifieds. A given term, it is true, may be situated in the plurality of languages, but not in terms of a messianic end or transfiguration, so much as in the sense of their infinite conservation of signification and meaning [*voler dire*]. It is enough to reflect for an instant to realize that here it is precisely the messianic end of languages which Benjamin proposed which is excluded: esperanto is an infinite meaning [*voler dire*] which finds no end. Any concept of universal history which had esperanto as its model could only be a summarial organization of the essential elements of all particular histories; this summary would not be the world of an integral actuality liberated from writing, but writing relegated to an infinite handing down.

Another interpretation towards which Benjamin was explicitly hostile is one which conceives of universal language (or history)

as an "ideal," in the sense of an infinite duty which crosses all historical evolution. The inexpressive word would be an infinite task (and, as such, is never fulfilled), towards which the historical experience of speaking man is moving. One such attitude (which only falsely can be termed religious) with regard to language and to the historical tradition is affirmed today by a philosophical current, developing from an interpretation of Heidegger as it is linked to traditional Anglo-Saxon analytic thought, which has gained in stature in the contemporary academic *koiné*.

According to this conception,

every speech act, as it occurs, also renders present the unsaid to which it refers as response and call. All human discourse is finite, in the sense that in it there is always an infinity of meaning to develop and interpret.<sup>20</sup>

This infinity of meaning is that to which ever act of listening must be attentive: authentic interpretation is that which, leaving open the infinite historical community of messages, situates each historical utterance in the unsaid which is destined for infinite interpretation. Any interpreter who chooses not to maintain the infinity of historical tradition would appear, in the words of Gadamer, as "a dog to whom someone is trying to indicate something, and who inevitably bites the hand that feeds it information instead of looking in the direction indicated." Benjamin explicitly turned against such a perspective when he grouped together the social democratic transformation of a Marxist ideal of a classless society (which was for him genuinely messianic) into a never-ending task, with an analogous transformation, conceived by neo-Kantianism, of the Kantian idea into an ideal. Just as the classless society here becomes the foundation and guide of all historical change without ever being actually realized, so the ideal language becomes—in the hermeneutic perspective—the unutterable foundation which controls the destiny of the interminable linguistic movement without ever reaching the level of the word. "A classless society," Benjamin suggested rather, "is not the final scope of historical progress, but its interruption, so often missed and finally fulfilled."<sup>21</sup>

True textual hermeneutics is, for Benjamin, the exact opposite of what is proposed by contemporary hermeneutics: if the interpreter looks to the unsaid and the infinity of meaning it is certainly not in order to conserve them but in order to fulfill them, to finish them off. Like the dog in Gadamer's example, the interpreter obstinately bites the hand of the historic moment because, in an infinite returning, it ceases to indicate beyond itself. Authentic

criticism is the end and mortification of the work: explaining the idea, criticism strips the work to the bone, it dazzles it, it *tells* it.

The mystical basis of this conception of language and history becomes evident in another theory which Benjamin legitimates: that ancient cabalistic theory of language which, in our time, has found its most authoritative exposition in the work of Scholem. According to this idea, the Name of God is the foundation of all human language. This name does not contain, however, its own sense nor is it utterable; in fact, it is constituted by the twenty two-letters of the alphabet, which combine to form all of the languages of man.

"This name," writes Scholem,

makes no sense to the Cabalists in its common form, it has no concrete meaning. The lack of significance of the name of God indicates its position as the foundation and center of revelation. Behind every revelation of meaning in language . . . stands this element which dominates and makes meaning possible, and which, without meaning itself, assigns all meaning. That which addresses creation and revelation, the word of God, is infinitely interpretable and is reflected within our language. Its rays and sounds which we intercept are not communications but callings. What is signified, what has form and meaning is not this word itself, but the *tradition* of this word, its mediation and reflection in time.<sup>22</sup>

With this mystical conception of the relationship between the "literal" name of God and human language, we enter a horizon of thought which was clearly familiar to Benjamin and which today has been secularized in the theory of the supremacy of the letter or the gram (as the originary negative foundation of language) which, stemming from Derrida, has seen numerous applications in contemporary French thought. While the mystical and insignificant character of the name of God is linked to its constitution by pure letters in the Cabala as well as in its grammatological version, Benjamin explicitly affirms that the language of redeemed humanity has "broken the chains of writing" and is a language "not written, but joyously acted out." To the "writing of what has never been said" of the cabalistic method, Benjamin here proposes a "reading of what has never been written." If the letters which form the unpronounceable name of God are those which commit human language to an historical handing down and an infinite interpretation, then we can suppose (according to a notion which Benjamin once had of comparing his relationship to theology with

the relationship between absorbent paper and ink: "It [the paper] is completely saturated. But if the paper had any say, there would be no more ink.") that the universal language represents rather the definitive cancellation and resolution of human language, the name of God definitively and absolutely expressed in words.

With the exclusion of these three hypotheses, we have delineated, even if by process of elimination, some other physiognomic trait of pure language, though clearly not its entire form. And yet what was at stake, for Benjamin, was something like the supreme problem of thought. This is made evident by the fact that in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* he strictly links the pure language of Adamic names with the Platonic theory of ideas:

Ideas are something linguistic (*ein Sprachliches*) and precisely in the essence of the word every time it is the moment when the word becomes a symbol. In empirical perception when words are split up, a manifestly profane significance inserts itself beside their more or less hidden symbolic aspect. It is up to philosophers, through exposition, to restore the symbolic character of the word to its pre-eminence, where the idea reaches its self-sufficient meaning which is the opposite of all direct communication with the outside . . . in philosophic contemplation the idea loosens itself from the intimacy with reality, as the word regains its denominative power.<sup>23</sup>

And it is precisely the pure denominative power "not lost in cognitive significance" which, in the passage immediately following, constitutes Adam, along with Plato, as the true father of philosophy.

The comprehension of the status of names becomes, at this point, as essential, but also as aporetic, as the comprehension of the status of ideas in Plato's *Parmenides* (those ideas which Plato says were born precisely from a search into the *logoi*, the words). Do names, like ideas with respect to phenomena, exist as reality in themselves, separate (*χωρίς*) with respect to existing words? Is there a separation (*χωρισμός*) between the one and the other? Or rather—as in the relationship between ideas and phenomena—is the supreme task of thought to construe the relationship (not the *χωρισμός*, the separation, but the *χωρα*, the region) between the language of names and human language? Because once again, explicitly from the capacity to construe this relationship, the question is raised whether the language of names and the universal language should be conceived as an unreachable origin and an infinite task, or whether, on the other hand, the effective construc-

tion of this relation, of this region, becomes the task of the philosopher as translator, of the historian as critic, and finally the ethical responsibility of every speaking person.

In the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue," the exposition of the idea in phenomena is inseparable from the salvation of phenomena in the idea: the two interpenetrate in a single gesture. "The exposition of phenomena," Benjamin writes, "is also that of ideas, and only here whatever is unique in the phenomena is saved."<sup>24</sup> However, in this unity a dialectic appears in which origin and end become identified and transform each other. The origin is not in this case a provenance (*Entstehung*), but rather something like an *Euphänomenon* in the Goethian sense, a "phenomenon of origin" in which "is shaped the figure where ideas always reconfront the world of history until that world lies down, terminated in the totality of its history."<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the end is not a simple cessation, but rather a totality ("The being which is in question in philosophy," according to Benjamin, "is not satisfied with the phenomenon but only with the consummation of its history"). In the idea, the phenomenon finishes itself off, "it becomes that which was not: totality." Because of this, the power of the idea does not invest the sphere of facts, "but refers to their prehistory and posthistory," to their origin and their completed totality.

Like the origin, the language of names is not, then, an initial chronological point, just as the messianic end of languages, the universal language of redeemed humanity, is not a simple chronological cessation. Together they constitute the two faces of a single "idea of language" which the 1916 and 1921 essays on the task of the translator presented separately.

If, at this point, we return to the text with which we began, we understand in what sense Benjamin stated that the universal language of redeemed humanity which is the same as its history, is "the very idea of a universally comprehended prose, just as the language of birds is comprehended by the children born on Sunday." The universal language in question here can only be, for Benjamin—we must acknowledge both the audacity and the coherence of this theory—the idea of language, that is, not an ideal (in the neo-Kantian sense) but the very *Platonic idea* of language which saves and contains in itself all languages and which an enigmatic Aristotelian fragment describes as "a middle, a mediator between prose and poetry." For Benjamin, it coincides, however, with the very idea of prose, according to the notion of a prosaic nucleus in every linguistic formation which he expressed in his university thesis on the Romantic conception of criticism.

An observation made by Valéry in an article in the *Encyclopédie Française* struck Benjamin while he was working on an essay for the *Narratore*, and he transcribed it in his notes: "The essence of prose is to perish, that is, to be understood, to be dissolved, destroyed with no chance of return, totally substituted by the image or the impulse." Inasmuch as it has reached its own limit of transparency, inasmuch as it says and means only itself, the word restored to the idea dissolves immediately. It is "pure history," a history without grammar or tradition which knows no past or repetition, but which rests only on its never having been. It is that which, in every historical language, continually pronounces itself and comes about not as a presupposed unsayable, but as the never said which nourishes the life of the language. It is truly the "eternal lamp" which, in a fragment from the same period during which Benjamin was working out his concept of history, he describes as the image of a "pure historical essence": the "flame which lights up on the final day and feeds on all that has never happened among men."<sup>26</sup> The idea of language is the language which no longer presupposes any other language, and which, having burned within itself every presupposition and name, has nothing more to say, but, simply, speaks.

In this perfect transparency of language where every distinction between the field of names and signifying words, between the intended and the said, is leveled, it seems truly as if languages—and with them all human culture—have reached their messianic end. But this applies only within a determined concept of language and a determined concept of culture: the familiar elements which serve as the foundation for all evolution and historic tradition developing from the immedicable split between the thing to be transmitted and the act of transmission, between names and words, and which guaranteed, at this price, the infinity and continuity of the historical (as well as the linguistic) process.

Benjamin expressed himself without hesitation against this conception when he wrote that the past should be saved, not so much from the oblivion and distortion in which it is held, but "from a determined mode of tradition," and that "the manner in which the past is read as an inheritance is more unspeakable than its potential disappearance." Or, again, that "the history of culture increases the weight of the treasures which burden the shoulders of mankind. But we lack the strength to shake them from our backs and so we take them by the hand."

Here, instead, humanity has truly taken by the hand its "treasures": its language and history, its language history, to be more

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precise. The split within the field of language which formed the base for the inextricable link between language and history—and at the same time guaranteed their asymptotic impossibility of reconciliation—is closed up to leave space for a perfect identification of language and history, of praxis and word.

For this, universal history knows no past to transmit, but it is the world of an “integral actuality.”

Language here disappears as an autonomous category. It is impossible to develop a distinct image of it or to imprison it in any writing: men no longer write their language, but they act it out like a celebration without rites. They understand each other “as the children born on Sunday understand the language of birds.”

It is certainly difficult to imagine a human community and human language which no longer refer to any unsayable foundation, are no longer destined for an infinite handing down, and in which words are no longer distinguished from any other human practice. But this, and nothing less, is what remains to be thought out by anyone concerned with the problem at this level. Perhaps what we face is something so simple that we lack the courage to think it, that courage, as Wittgenstein said, which only thought can summon.

That courage which directed Hegel, at the end of the *Science of Logic*, to formulate the absolute idea as “the originary word, which is an utterance, but such that as utterance, it is immediately lost again while it exists.”

That same courage which underlies the prose of a story by a great Italian writer of the twentieth century: Antonio Delfini. In this story Delfini—according to a model which is as old as the origins of Italian poetry, the romances of the troubadours, and Dante—presents a woman as object of desire who is also a language. However, this language is unknown, totally unfamiliar, and it does not exist anywhere: the Basque language. *Souvenir of Basque* is the title of these stories: that is, if my reading is correct, the memory of an unknown language is desired beyond all other loves.

If we wanted to express the memory of this language, Delfini writes, “we could not say anything that had anything to say.” We would have to speak without having anything to say. In fact, this memory is the end of all memory. Delfini writes:

We must never remember, if it is true that one day or another we have to stop this sighing and start running, and stay together as

if it were the most natural thing in the world. All of my prayers, when I found myself alone in the past few months, were directed towards one hope: Lord, make the day come when I will no longer remember Isabella. I would like to be so close to her that no matter how hard I tried I would not even be able to conjure up her image.

In this end of memory, in this unheard of proximity between man and his language where there is no more room for any image, letter, or grammar, we should perhaps see the true figure of the universal language of humanity. And this language, this proximity, are, Delfini writes, "the most natural thing in the world."

1. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), Band I, Teil 3, p. 1239.
2. Benjamin, Band I, Teil 3, p. 1235.
3. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, I, XLI.
4. Augustine, *De Ordine*, 2, 12, 37.
5. Varro, *De Lingua Latina*, VIII, 5, 6.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, trans. Amedeo G. Conte (Turin: Einaudi, 1964), paragraph 4026. Eng. version: trans. D. F. Pears and R. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).
7. Dante, *Convivio*, II, XIII, 8, 10.
8. Benjamin, Band II, Tiel I, p. 139.
9. Benjamin, Band II, Tiel I, p. 139.
10. Benjamin, Band II, Tiel I, p. 144 (also for the immediately preceding citation).
11. Benjamin, Band II, Tiel I, p. 145.
12. Benjamin, Band II, Tiel I, p. 146.
13. Benjamin, Band I, Tiel I, p. 153.
14. Benjamin, Band IV, Tiel I, p. 13.
15. Benjamin, Band IV, Tiel I, p. 14.
16. Benjamin, Band IV, Tiel I, p. 19.
17. Benjamin, Band IV, Tiel I, p. 13.
18. Benjamin, Band IV, Tiel I, p. 14.
19. Benjamin, Band I, Tiel III, p. 1235.
20. H. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960), pp. 523-24.
21. Benjamin, Band I, Tiel III, p. 1231.
22. G. Scholem, *Judaica*, III (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 69.
23. Benjamin, Band I, Tiel I, pp. 216, 217.
24. Benjamin, Band I, Tiel I, p. 225.
25. Benjamin, Band I, Tiel I, p. 226.
26. Benjamin, Band I, Tiel III, p. 1239.