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Reading Rosmarie Waldrop and Yoel Hoffmann: Embodied Thought and Linguistic Gap

Deborah Meadows

At any given time, the living see themselves in the midday of history. They are obliged to prepare a banquet for the past. The historian is the herald who invites the dead to the table. [N15, 1]

Walter Benjamin, Arcades Project

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The events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink. The history which he lays before the reader comprises, as it were, the citations occurring in this text, and it is only these citations that occur in a manner legible to all. To write history thus means to cite history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context. [N11, 3]

Walter Benjamin, Arcades Project

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Walter Benjamin writes suggestively from the critical insight that smooth narratives are compositions of "authoritative citation," or fragments of available, desirable, or culturally-typical material; that versions are made from earlier versions. We see in his collection Arcades Project a determined collection, placement, and cunning selection of citations on the past of Paris, and we see a turn away from conventions of historic narrative toward alternative practice. The inescapable presence, perhaps necessity, of citation that Walter Benjamin describes in historiography has analogs in many other disciplines—despite their originating claims for unbroken wholes and unbiased commitments to truth and knowledge. The following paper is a citation-driven study of metonymy, and, by reverse composition, a reading of Rosmarie Waldrop's recent collection of poetry entitled Blindsight. The paper will cite portions of her source works as well as from Max: Pensky on Benjamin and citation, and from Adorno on Hölderlin and parataxis.
On the copyright page of *Blindsight*, Waldrop acknowledges sources such as Yoel Hoffmann’s *Bernhard*, Hölderlin’s poetry, Antonio Damasio’s studies in neuroscience, and Hans Reichenbach’s mathematics. Further, her life’s work has been as poetry translator with a deep relation to many poets including Edmond Jabès. Waldrop’s work here, and in other volumes, often critiques the Cartesian divide between mind and body but also considers how biology (of perception, for example) may drive knowledge and how cultural materials, such as language and literature, shape or misshape our knowledge. *Blindsight* considers the divide, per Reichenbach, between our visualization and logic.

Among several works Waldrop cited as sources for *Blindsight* is *Bernhard* (1989; English, 1991) by Yoel Hoffmann. It’s fascinating to see how portions of this fictitious life writing of shattered memory, recollections of a movement from Berlin to Palestine in the 1930s and 40s, are re-appropriated in a form of collaged life writing in Waldrop’s collection. Our fictitious Bernhard retrieves shards of the past that are wistful, others quotidian, some accidents that are comedic, others elegiac. The question is whether memory may shift, or may have somatic structure derived from geography: do the literary conventions of desert parables in the works of Jabès and Hoffmann fracture or hinge from the original place?

In one portion Hoffmann’s character-within-the-character, Bernhard’s Pavel with a severed limb removes the leather straps that held his false leg, slaps his stump that “freed from constraint, would wriggle like a happy baby” (#44) as if life was formed from loss and amputation. This segment is followed by an excursus on the philosophic question on the seat of identity, in Pavel’s wooden leg that “went up in flames when Napoleon stood at the gates of Moscow” or in Pavel’s flesh leg, the “where is Pavel”... Earlier in the text, Hoffmann’s character Bernhard looked at Spinozian and Cartesian traditions – the former unifying experience of mind and body; whereas, Descartes’ cogito severs mind and body, the view that comes to dominate Western thought and consciousness. When is a puppet wood and when is he flesh? Waldrop returns to this cleft between opposite views, I suspect, because neither can they satisfy or exhaust the explanation of who we are nor of the lived needs of our lives that fall across a biological/cultural divide. We can ask when a limb is simply mine, when it is me as identity, and see that our mentation is grounded in biological form, and see that that answer does not suffice completely because, too, the capacity for language projects flesh, that culture drives knowledge, and our bodies, marked or broken, are books, too.

How might the fictitious rendering of interrupted experiences of flesh and language provide a reading of fragmented life? In *Lavish Absence: Recalling and*
Rereading. Edmond Jabès, Waldrop writes, of the breaking of Mosaic tablets as a necessary condition for legibility. Waldrop's work keeps company with Hoffmann, Jabès, and others that collage fragments as a necessary condition for reading, a movement that triangulates between polar situation. On page 17, Waldrop's reflection of the life and work of Jabès:

But with Jabès, too, the emphasis is not on isolating minimal units of meaning, but on the interruption, the gap between. "Interruption is one of the fundamental devices of all structuring," says Walter Benjamin. The shadow zone of silence, of margins, gains weight, becomes an element of structure. The interruption allows for breath, for possibility, for stopping to think.

And perspectivism. Inherent in the form of the fragment, it acknowledges the elusive whole, be it Jabès's transcendent totality or, for me, here, the man Edmond Jabès and his work. And encircles it at least to some degree, I hope (17).

And, after an exploratory passage on numerous ways the fragment may operate in service to ambiguity and deferral of settled meaning, Waldrop writes: "I love David Mendelson's false etymology that derives the word 'mosaic' from Moses, from his breaking of the tablets. This is certainly behind Jabès's 'exploded book,' where the death by scattering God's word is the condition of legibility" (19). She then quotes the Mendelson passage that concludes: "The destroyed book allows us to read the book."

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In Max Pensky's Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Meaning, Benjamin is cited on the activity of mosaic construction:

Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum (Schwung). Both are made up of the distinct and disparate; and nothing could bear more powerful testimony to the transcendent force of the sacred image and the truth itself. The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying conception, and the brilliance of the representation depends as much on this value as the brilliance of the mosaic does on the quality of the glass paste. The relationship between the micrological processing of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth-content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter (18). (Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" 28-29)

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How does the study of memory and biography always take a turn toward the study of Time? Waldrop's earlier work is extended here: a slippage of fixed meaning,
a play of signifiers in a field of desire for knowledge that defers metaphysical
tropes. Although Waldrop’s *Blindsight* and *Bernhard* by Yoel Hoffmann are about
departures and about new locations with shifting encounters of layered history,
linguistic, culinary, marketplace, art and culture systems, might their work with
the absent center offer an ethical antidote to totalizing systems?

We read in section 34 that Hoffmann’s Bernhard lives in a year “the Atlantic
Ocean fills up with an infinity of sounds. Igor Stravinsky sails across. Arnold
Schoenberg sails across. And Paul Hindemith, and Béla Bartók, and Darius Mil-
haud, and Kurt Weil…” Against this situation ripe with history, our Bernhard
invents an imaginary character we meet in section 35, D. S. Gregory, who “was
born in Moscow to Pavel and Yekaterina Sholochov” and inherits the legacy of the
“Turkı-Bulgariaşt Kingdom.” The imaginary character and his relation to history
show a way the fictitious Bernhard, or Hoffmann, or any person, interprets their
times, about how they inhabit dream-time or use fantasy as, perhaps, a psycholog-
ical working out of their lives and conflicts. Bernhard draws on clichés, and we
wonder if fantasies used to cope and survive re-enforce conventions of our culture
even when that culture may be destroying us.

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If one postmodernist view considers self and society as constructed through effects
of situated language, neurobiologist Antonio Damasio in *Looking for Spinoza:
Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* is concerned with how self and society come
from structures in the brain exempted from historic moment. In his neural re-
search, he studies emotions that he posits may come first in evolutionary de-
velopment, that are observable, and are in response to the world; whereas, he posits
feelings as following emotions, he writes, like shadows, as private, and neurally-
mapped patterns of interior states such as well-being.

Waldrop acknowledges Damasio in her *Blindsight* volume and continues an
ongoing study of neurological structures of experience. Damasio, like Waldrop,
rejects the Cartesian division of mind and body and looks to Spinoza, who in his
*Ethics*, described a mind-body integration.

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Waldrop opens with “Hölderlin’s Hybrids” and collages from the Hölderlin and
Hoffmann texts and other, social and literary sources sympathetic to Hoffmann’s
approach. Here we can see ways Waldrop’s work extends her earlier books’ ex-
amination of cultural and social encoding at the level of the sentence toward a use
of the sentence-level tension that breaks into gaps punctuated by full stop periods.
For example, Waldrop writes:
Electric bulb. How the words are. Suspended around you.
And. Bones in the body. (5)

Here are interrupted flows of light particles, electricity, predication, conjunction, and, a Waldropian move, the unseen skeletal structure of our bodies — indeed the cover art of this volume is a work entitled “Totem Series” that at first glance seems a three-column set of x-rayed bones, but further study suggests a lamellisection of portrait photos — that is, an Oulipian procedure that cuts images into strips to be reassembled by procedure distancing, if not reversing, them from their original. Series, too, may offer an alternative to the narrative crescendo of conventional forms — a horizontality against the allure of heroic verticality.

This poetic practice returns to and extends her earlier works such as Reluctant Gravities in its exploration of intimate relations and gender stereotyping. She worked this area of mixing different discourses in an often ironic or even comical way in earlier works as in The Reproduction of Profiles. In “Cornered Stones” of Split Infinites she has already developed the mixture of discourse describing her childhood in Nazi Germany. She furthers a type of life writing that, like Jabès’s and Hoffmann’s examples, is both individual and shared social experience of war, losses that mix sacred and popular or commercial references as well as comedic accident — a way to defy the nostalgia type of television broadcast that packages notable shared events with a prepared emotional prescription. Here is Hoffmann:

1.

After his wife died, Berhard thought:
“The world is infinite. Beyond every galaxy there’s another galaxy.” He tried to imagine how Paula, her flesh pale, was gradually becoming one with the vast order of the Universe. But Paula’s death was not such a simple matter. “Where,” thought Bernhard to himself, “Is Paula now?”

And later, Hoffman writes in section #2:

2.

...Most of
the time Bernhard played with a lump of wax (in
due course he came to Palestine by himself). ...

To compare, here is Waldrop’s opening:

Here I work toward. A kind of elegy. Here a strange ceiling. "Earth fills his mouth." I would look at you. And write ...(3)

And then onto the lower part of the following page, Waldrop writes of grief, death, and detached words followed by: "Absence. But it cuts. Repeat. Furiously Yes then No. Even a fictional character catches a chill. Makes the heart..." (4). Waldrop seems to move in sympathy with Bernhard's thoughts on his wife's possible absorption into the larger galaxy, and so emerges a view of the world as the thought of the galactic flesh, a sort of Spinozan brain as the good idea thought up by the body. Both passages ask: what is material? Is a lump of wax another language, is poetry the matter that poets manipulate that is ultimately futile yet necessary as is elegy?

In #45, Hoffman describes neurostructures and their circuit of stimuli and response, and, in a later segment, character Bernhard goes to see "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves" with Gustave while Jews are being smuggled from Denmark to Sweden:

A nerve is a fiber that spreads out from the brain in one's skull, or from the spinal cord. It transmits stimuli from every part of the body (as when one says, for example, "A guttren Shabbes"). When you are thinking about them, the nerves are transmitting all kinds of stimuli (backwards and forwards). Bernhard thinks nerves are "Nerven." Nerven are a lot of little dwarfs singing "Hi-Ho, Hi-Ho."

Waldrop insets this with Hölderlin’s poem fragments, his themes of early Swabian heroes and legendary figures from the Crusades, Mohammed, Rinaldo, and Barbarossa. Might we consider this as an analog to how Bernhard creates a fantasy character to work out conflicts, create a historic plot engine, a notable lineage—and so their functions relate to poets of Weimar classicism such as Hölderlin’s use
of classic Greek as well as medieval and legendary past—is it a fantasy solution? What does this show about the society that is the source of the conflict? When does a doll become a figurine—hardened, formal, and aloof? Later we will read from Adorno: a view of Hölderlin as anticlassicist.

Hölderlin’s fragmentary poems, for many of us perhaps, may be his most interesting work; he writes from the immediate misery of conditions following the French Revolution. Not only is he a poet who is one of Waldrop’s childhood references, her segment here refers to her performance as a ten-year old in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, performed from the back of an American Army truck following Germany’s surrender in May 1945 (*Gale Literary Data Base*, Steve Evans, 2004). In her hands they are bled into a text that explores deep neuro-structural response and memory retrieval that are both reflective and autonomic, not imaginable without a flesh and blood body subject to physical forces of the earth. Here, Waldrop writes:

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3
Something else is at. To leave your house and cross the Atlantic, Mediterranean, Aegean, Pacific. So many were killed. And to stand each. In a doorway. And say I don’t live here.

△
In the dark leaf nerye fibers spread out and from the brain. Scatter and like flames. From the spinal cord. Stinging. And stimuli from every. By ravenous hunger overcome. Transmitting backwards and forwards. “Nerves” more than seven. Dwarfs hi ho off to work. And farewell to the personal. Pronoun.

△
So Mohammed. Rinaldo. Barbarossa. As divided into fragments. The emperor Heinrich. I am however mixing up the centuries. But gloom there is. In every needle, thread, and cloth. Crossed the Alps and with his own voice sighed “some things…” And his son Konrad of poison died. Hark ye the horn of the watchman at night. And hair. Away from the body grows. (7-8)
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Waldrop cites Hans Reichenbach’s *The Philosophy of Space and Time* as a source for *Blindsight* causing this reader to reflect on his life. In 1933 with Hitler’s rise
to power, Reichenbach fled to Istanbul, then to the US where he settled as a faculty member of UCLA and remained until his death in 1953. Considered a leader of the Berlin Group of logical empiricists and a close associate of Einstein, most sources cite Reichenbach’s work as a defense of the conventionality of geometry and of simultaneity, the term for Einsteinian relativity, that certain physical qualities considered objective are “relative to” the state of motion of the observer. As a reader and respondent to his work, Waldrop’s poem explores how seemingly unbiased scientific observation is historically conditioned.

Reichenbach’s work, *The Philosophy of Space and Time*, in part, details the problem that nonlinear geometry cannot be visualized. He writes how investigations that “led to visualization of non-Euclidean geometry through an adjustment in the perception of congruences, are therefore applicable to mathematics in the same fashion as physics” (87). Further, he demonstrates that the “concept of congruence” is transitive (88) and shows there are different ideas of congruence between Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry that are “not identical but play equivalent roles in the axiomatic systems...” (89-90). So a reader might notice the ways Waldrop’s poems require a consideration of those “presupposing tacit conditions” (Reichenbach, 90), and that:

It is intuitively certain that a straight line is shorter than any line however slightly curved; this insight is due to the peculiarity of human thinking that it can draw strict conclusions from vague visual pictures; this is an important ability of the human mind which we put to continual use. It is therefore impossible to disprove the existence of pure visualization the basis of the lack of clarity in visual pictures: On the contrary, this argument has given new impetus to the thesis of pure visualization, since it has been interpreted in terms of a distinction between the vague perceptual space and the precise space of visualization. The main objection to the theory of pure visualization is our thesis that the non-Euclidean axioms can be visualized just as rigorously if we adjust the definition of congruence. This thesis is based on the discovery that the normative function of visualization is not of visual but of logical origin and that the intuitive acceptance of certain axioms is based on conditions from which they follow logically, and which have previously been smuggled into images. The axiom that the straight line is the shortest distance is highly intuitive only because we have adapted the concept of straightness to the system of Euclidean concepts.... (91, original italics)

In a sympathetic move, Waldrop’s poetry questions the persuasive clarity of visualization, and her poetry explores the gap between “vague perceptual space and the precise space of visualization” or “vague visual pictures.” Waldrop’s poetry can cue us to our confidence in visual clarity and sharpen our sense of the difference between the logical rather than physical congruence of our lives and language. Waldrop’s poetry reflects the problem of visualizing the past by offering a vital alternative to representation that, too often, slips to formulaic narrative
structures fooling us with clarity derived from a conventional order. Again, the
importance of Waldrop’s poetry includes how we might explore pictorial elements
or procedure, and come to understand and critique how we learn conventions that
shape how we see landscape, hear history, feel common sense, or imagine charac-
ters.

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In an e-mail, Rosmarie Waldrop answers my query whether she memorized
Hölderlin’s poetry as a child:

Hölderlin was read, maybe not in elementary school, but in high school. But it wasn’t
the fragments (those I came to later), rather early and middle Hölderlin. The ones I
remember and practically knew by heart are: “Als ich ein Knabe war” [when I was a boy],
“Hälfte des Lebens” [Mid-life], “Schicksalslied” [Fate’s Song?].

Hölderlin writes the dynamic tension between nature and the poet, yet Waldrop’s
gap has more in common with Jabès who sees break, gap, mosaic shattering as the
very necessary condition for the book, for legibility. Origins, as constructs, and
Benjamin’s dialectical image are deeply related to legibility: they are the “eddy
in the stream of becoming” (Pensky 217-218). Meta-social life-writing is constitu-
ted by its moment, yet people are also made by economic and political forces.
Hölderlin thought Oedipus’s lack of knowledge, or severance from his origins the
source of tragedy.

In Notes to Literature, Adorno writes that Heidegger is wrong to character-
ize Hölderlin’s poetry as mythological. Adorno writes that demythologization is
bound to have a layer of mythology (116) and that the danger of language is
getting lost and selling out the truth (120), and so turns to Hölderlin’s work for
strength against the merely instrumental view of the world (127).

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Further into his reading of Hölderlin’s poetry, Adorno points to the Protestant
taboo against graven icons, then to the implied emphasis on text alone:

…which in Hölderlin is the law of poetry, with a taboo against abstract utopia, a taboo
in which the theological ban on graven images, which Hölderlin shares with Hegel and
Marx, lives on. Not backwards: because of the irretrievability of something once over-
thrown, the point at which poetry, history, and ideal intersect. The decision, finally, ex-
pressed as an anacoluth in an amazing reversal, “Be rocked as / On swaying skiff of the
sea,” is like an intention to cast aside synthesis and trust to pure passivity in order to
completely fill the present. For all synthesis – no one knew better than Kant – occurs in
opposition to the pure present, as a relationship to the past and the future, the backwards
and forwards that falls under Hölderlin’s taboo. (142)
Adorno's chapter on Hölderlin's poetry is most often quoted for his insight on the later, fragmented poems' use of parataxis as, too, should his remarks on sequence for poems concerned with the serial poem be studied. In contrast to how deMan and Heidegger made a sharp two-position dialectic of opposites, Adorno would rather study the structural possibility of the missing middle (132-3), which has been a concern in Waldrop's work, too, so that parataxis has "the tendency to take over larger structures" often "dispensing with predicative assertion [that] causes the rhythm to approach musical development" in poems such as "Half of Life".

...a middle element standing outside the moments it is to connect, is eliminated as being external and inessential...[that] gives Hölderlin's late poetry its anticlassicistic quality, its rebellion against harmony. What is lined up in sequence, unconnected, is as harsh as it is flowing. The mediation is set within what is mediated instead of bridging it...it is only the paratactical form itself that produces the caesura between the halves of life.\(133\)

Benjamin writes: "History decays into images, not into stories" [N 11, 4].

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Codá
From Edmond Jabès, The Book of Questions, volume 1, translated by Rosmarie Waldrop:

For five summers I have followed a book which advances quietly in the void where the work builds up. Daily enterprise of joining through the feverish page the ascus of the sign. A book which is the lacing of risk.

I must tell a strange story which obsesses me of a woman in her eighties who, on her deathbed, spoke just before dying in the language of her childhood (which she had long forgotten). This act in the fog of the unconscious struck me – and still strikes me – as an example of the behavior of poets who speak in their works as they never do otherwise.

Every work cancels the dark. Every work is a hymn from the other side of memory to a memory that is spellbound...\(325-356\)

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Works Cited


