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4 | A POSITIVE BARBARISM?

Some concepts must be indicated by an extraordinary and sometimes even barbarous or shocking word [...] Some concepts call for archaisms and others for neologisms, shot through with almost crazy etymological exercises [...] In each case, there must be a strange necessity for these words and for their choice, like an element of style. The concept's baptism calls for a specifically philosophical taste that proceeds with violence or by insinuation and constitutes a philosophical language within language.

—Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (7-8)

it is the inconspicuous aspect—or this *and* the offensive aspect (the two together are not a contradiction)—which survives in true works and which constitutes the point where the content reaches the breaking point for an authentic researcher.

—Walter Benjamin, “Rigorous Study of Art”
[1932] (2005b: 668)

In the second epigraph, taken from his review-essay the “Rigorous Study of Art” [“Strenge Kunstwissenschaft,” 1932-33], Walter Benjamin locates the crux of an artwork not in the meaning or impression of the work as a whole, but in the insignificant, inconspicuous details.¹ His statement has more consequences for the critic (what Benjamin calls an “authentic researcher”) than for the artwork. The critic is called to take on an entirely different approach to artworks than the traditional methods employed at the time Benjamin wrote this essay. Indeed, “the hallmark of the new type of researcher,” Benjamin continues, “is not the eye for the ‘all encompassing whole’ or the eye for the ‘comprehensive context’ (which mediocrity has claimed for itself), but rather the capacity to be at home in marginal domains” (2005b: 670). Instead of a holistic approach to the work as a unified entity, the researcher is called to adopt a microscopic method: to pay attention to those elements not fitting the general pattern of the work, but standing out due to some, in Benjamin’s words, “offensive aspect.”

¹ The first version of the essay “Strenge Kunstwissenschaft” was written between July and December 1932, and a second version was published in the *Literaturblatt der Frankfurter Zeitung* in July 1933. The essay is translated by Thomas Y. Levin.

Although, one might think, their “offensive aspect” would make these elements all the more striking, Benjamin believes that they are rather “inconspicuous,” and insists that their offensiveness and inconspicuousness are not at odds (“the two together are not a contradiction”). The latter observation may allude to the traditional researcher’s attitude: trained to notice only the elements that fit the image of the whole, this researcher often misses those offensive, deviant elements. The work, however, may contain insubordinate or elusive elements, and the researcher needs to bring their offensive potential to the fore. In focusing on offensive, deviant, and marginalized elements, this method has something “barbarian” about it.

Benjamin’s essay is a review of the first volume of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*—a collection of art-historical essays from scholars of the Vienna School, which Benjamin saw as introducing a new method for the study of art. Benjamin perceived this method as a translation of his own critical project into art-historical practices (Levin 81). Thus, the importance Benjamin here gives to details and marginal elements in the study of the artwork is telling for the kind of textual criticism he wrote about and performed in his own work. Typical for this criticism, as he writes in the “Rigorous Study of Art,” is “the willingness to push research forward to the point where even the ‘insignificant’—no, *precisely* the insignificant—becomes significant” (2005b: 668).² The insignificant is significant because it holds the key to the work’s performance and to the actualization of its material contents: “it is precisely in the investigation of the marginal case that the material contents reveal their key position most decisively” (669).³ Marginal and invisible details often hold a revolutionary potential in Benjamin’s own writings. Strange elements or erratic interventions take it upon themselves to redefine tradition and change the course and fate of language and culture. Such elements can be thought of as latent “barbarisms” in Benjamin’s texts, which can be activated through the critic’s (or reader’s) intervention.

In this chapter, I probe the meanings and operations of barbarism as a philosophical as well as a methodological concept in Benjamin. More specifically, I unpack Benjamin’s notion of “positive barbarism” in his essay “Experience and Poverty” (“Erfahrung und Armut,” 1933), and I examine its relation to other appearances of “barbarism” in his writings. I trace the ways in which “positive barbarism” in this essay breaks with the negative genealogy of barbarism and creates a space for a positive resignification of this concept. As I will argue, this recasting of barbarism keeps the destructive connotations of the concept, but stages an intricate interplay between barbarism “as we know it” and its new, creative potential.

² In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, 1928] Benjamin makes a similar point: “The relationship between the minute precision of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth-content is only to be grasped through [the most precise] immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter” (28).

³ Benjamin argues that the “material content” [*Sachgehalt*] of a work, which in the most “crucial” and “meaningful” works is intimately linked with their “meaning content” [*Bedeutungsgehalt*], “present themselves to the researcher all the more clearly the more they have disappeared from the world” (2005b: 669).

By way of Benjamin's own instruction in the "Rigorous Study of Art," this chapter stumbles upon, and zooms into, an inconspicuous linguistic barbarism within Benjamin's concept of "positive barbarism." By disentangling the implications of this detail, I propose barbarism as an errant site, in which newness can break through from a creative accident, an unexpected alteration, a marginal element with a defamiliarizing effect. The barbarism within Benjamin's concept of barbarism allows me to explore how Benjamin's positive barbarian project unfolds performatively in his essay; in other words, how Benjamin's concept of barbarism is put in practice in his own writing as a methodological tool and textual strategy, which does what it says.

The linguistic barbarism in Benjamin's "positive barbarism" is bypassed in the English translation of his essay. The (mis)translation of Benjamin's "positive barbarism" by his translator in English is another "barbarism" scrutinized in this chapter. This (mis)translation becomes an occasion for laying out the determining conditions, the institutional and epistemological implications, and the effects of the translation of philosophical concepts. Instead of fully dismissing this translation as bad translating, I unfold the interpretive possibilities and the conceptual project it (unwittingly) puts forward, and the ways in which this project differs from Benjamin's positive barbarism as it unfolds in the German text.

The exploration of Benjamin's "positive barbarism" does not amount to a systematic theory of barbarism.⁴ Barbarism in Benjamin remains a concept that exceeds—by being in excess of—any attempt to crystallize its meaning and use, as it constantly subjects itself to criticism, new appropriations, mistranslations, and misinterpretations. However, as it opens itself to questioning, its methodological relevance breaks through: it inspires a kind of critical barbarian writing, which might be more constructive than any affirmative, logic-based philosophical project. With this in mind, my own reading in this chapter is grounded in a close literary analysis of Benjamin's text instead of a strictly philosophical approach, although I try to do justice to the philosophical density of Benjamin's writing. This kind of reading is invited by Benjamin's own mode of writing, in which the philosophical is intertwined with the literary, and in which systematic philosophical thinking cannot account for all kinds of experience, especially those generated by new artistic media and technology. By focusing on details in the text, my reading probes the operations of barbarism not only as a philosophical concept, but, primarily, as a textual and, more broadly, medial performance. Through this approach, I hope to gain some personal instruction in how to be a "barbarian researcher."

Strange Bedfellows: Positive Barbarism and Poverty of Experience

In 1933 the cloud of fascism starts to fall upon Europe, as Adolf Hitler assumes power in Germany and initiates the persecution of the Jews. That year Benjamin flees to Paris,

⁴ Here I agree with McLaughlin, who does not see a systematic theory of barbarism deriving from Benjamin's uses of the concept in various contexts in his writings (5).

where he would settle permanently and write some of his most influential essays. During his first year in Paris, Benjamin writes his short essay “Experience and Poverty” [“Erfahrung und Armut”].⁵

“Experience and Poverty” starts with an apparent paradox. While the development of technology has led to an “oppressive wealth of ideas,” it has simultaneously generated a new poverty of experience. Therefore, in what constitutes one of the dialectical contradictions of capitalism, the “tremendous development of technology” drains the reserves of human experience instead of enhancing them (Bracken 337). This new poverty can be seen in terms of an inability to communicate experience and leave traces. The experiences of previous generations fall short of providing means for interpreting and processing new social forms in modernity: “For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare, economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers” (“Experience and Poverty,” 2005b: 732).

This poverty should not be understood as lack. Rather, it springs out of excess: an excess of ideas and styles and an oppressive overload of culture in which people are swamped. People, Benjamin writes, “long to free themselves from experience.” They are not “ignorant or inexperienced,” but “[t]hey have ‘devoured’ everything, both ‘culture and people,’ and they have had such a surfeit, that it has exhausted them” (734). Thus, the answer to this new poverty should not be sought through an attempt to reconnect with the great past traditions, but by professing this poverty in order to explore new modes of being. To do that, one has to take up the work of destruction, in order to “start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further” (732). The name Benjamin chooses for this project is “barbarism”—not barbarism as we know it, but a new, positive, concept of barbarism.

This is how Benjamin introduces this concept:

Indeed (let’s admit it), our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism. Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. (732)

The word “hence” in the second sentence, which translates the German “damit,” can express both equality and causality, synchronicity and metachronicity. As such, it causes an ambiguity in the sentence. The absence of a verb in this elliptic sentence allows for speculation on the implied activity, and transfers the weight of the activity to the “hence.” Does “hence” (or “damit”) suggest an equation of this poverty with barbarism (“Hence, [the poverty of experience *equals*] a new kind of barbarism”)? Or does it imply that this new barbarism can emerge from the poverty of experience as a creative force

⁵ “Erfahrung und Armut” was written between spring and autumn 1933.

out of something negative ("Hence, [this poverty of experience can *lead to*] a new kind of barbarism)?)

If we follow the first option, namely that poverty of experience amounts to barbarism, then this poverty constitutes a disavowal of culture and a regress to a barbaric state. In this case, barbarism receives a negative definition: it denotes the negative opposite of culture or experience. If we pursue the second option, then this new barbarism is not there already, but may follow from the poverty of experience. This poverty may not be so bad after all, because it holds the potential to unleash a new barbarism as a positive force. What is more, the sense of causality in "hence" (as well as in "damit") makes the emergence of this new barbarism almost sound imperative. It is as if this barbarism urgently needs to be brought forth from the poverty of experience as the only viable alternative if we do not want this poverty to anesthetize our creative forces.

The two interpretative options for the function of "hence" are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they capture the double tension in the concept of barbarism, as simultaneously carrying a negative, violent force and a positive potential *in* and *from* this violence. Benjamin's new barbarism is not detached from the negativity of the old notion, since it, too, has to destroy and clear the way for a new start. The barbarian, who, according to the same essay, belongs to the "great, creative spirits," is first forced to engage in destruction, in order to start constructing from scratch, "to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right" (732).

The previously analyzed sentence in Benjamin's essay, starting with "hence," highlights the interrelation of a certain notion of experience with barbarism. Therefore, scrutinizing the notion of "experience" in Benjamin is a necessary step towards illuminating his notion of barbarism. Moreover, Benjamin's positive barbarism needs to be thought in relation to two contextual conditions, both decisive in shaping Benjamin's thinking and writing: the development of technology and new artistic media, and the threat of fascism. Experience, fascism, technology and new media all form an intricate nexus in Benjamin, within which I will place the discussion of "positive barbarism."

The notion of experience in Benjamin is surrounded by ambiguity.⁶ In his early essay "Experience" (1913), Benjamin gives a rather negative account of the notion. In this essay (written when Benjamin was only twenty-one years old), he attacks the tendency of adults to devalue the young by resting on a self-assumed notion of "experience" acquired with

⁶ In my exploration of the notion of "experience" throughout this study I refer to the concept of "Erfahrung" in Benjamin, and not "Erlebnis." Benjamin elaborates the distinction between the two notions in "The Storyteller" (1936) and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1940). Although they are both usually translated in English as "experience," when Benjamin differentiates the two, he presents "Erlebnis" as a kind of immediate experience, a sensation lived through momentarily, while "Erfahrung" is not only something that has taken place, but an ongoing kind of experience that enables new modes of knowing, understanding, and experiencing to emerge. The latter kind of experience is tied to the possibility of sharing and communicating, and it is precisely this experience and its communicability that have been lost with modernity and after World War I.

age. In Benjamin's eyes, the experience adults claim to carry is the opposite of novelty, energy, and creativity. "Experience" signifies "life's commonness" or "meaninglessness," and is associated with "compromise, impoverishment of ideas, and lack of energy" ("Experience," 2004: 3-4). Experience leads to a life devoid of spirit and condemned to mediocrity and preservation of the status quo. As such, it forestalls newness and radical change. The "experienced" adult or "philistine" in this early essay is not critical, and (thus) cannot create anything. This persona of the philistine is the opposite pole of Benjamin's later "(good) barbarian," as presented in "Experience and Poverty" as well as in another essay entitled "The Destructive Character" (1931). The great, new, and forward-looking things cannot even be "experienced," as Benjamin writes in "Experience," because only in the "inexperienceable can courage, hope, and meaning be given foundation" (4). Only towards the end of this essay does Benjamin consider the possibility of "a different experience" that is immediate, full of spirit and creativity, and thus opposed to the philistine's "comfortable" and spiritless kind of experience (5).

The predominantly negative connotations of "experience" in this essay could support a reading of the poverty of experience as a good thing. Since inexperience can give rise to radical critique and novelty, the affinity between Benjamin's "poverty of experience" and positive "new barbarism" becomes all the more convincing. Of course the argument in such an early essay as "Experience" cannot apodeictically demonstrate the content of "experience" in "Experience and Poverty." Benjamin's writings are replete with contradictions and surprising reversals. Therefore, one should be cautious when using the argument in one essay to read another one.

However, the positive potential of a deficit of experience is suggested in "Experience and Poverty" as well, albeit less explicitly than in "Experience." "Experience and Poverty" starts with a similar notion of experience, correlated with age. Here too, experience is handed down "with the authority of age": "everyone knew precisely what experience was: older people had always passed it on to younger ones" (2005b: 731). This kind of experience has disappeared in modernity. The argument that Benjamin unravels in the beginning of this essay is verbatim repeated in a paragraph from "The Storyteller" (1936). The identical part in these two essays concerns the loss of the ability to communicate experience, especially after World War I.⁷ Although Benjamin phrases the new condition in negative terms (loss, poverty, decrease of communicable experience), his appraisal of this new condition in both essays is by no means (only) negative. While the loss of the storyteller's aura seems to be lamented, it is also seen as part of a necessary historical development, which allows "a new beauty" to emerge—and with it perhaps a new kind of knowledge:

⁷ According to the argument in "The Storyteller," this recent poverty of experience has made storytelling a craft of the past.

And nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it [i.e. the end of storytelling as a result of the poverty of experience] merely a “symptom of decay,” let alone a “modern” symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the regular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing. (“The Storyteller,” 1999b: 86)

Benjamin is not merely nostalgic of the past but sees possibilities in the loss of the old. In the “Storyteller,” poverty of experience becomes the condition of possibility for the novel. The same poverty indicates new possibilities in “Experience and Poverty” as well.⁸ Poverty of experience, as well as barbarism, are read against the grain of their traditionally negative meanings and projected as conditions for surpassing the old. For Benjamin, the “divorce” of our culture from experience enables “the barbarians” to do away with the “oppressive wealth of ideas” and “the horrific mishmash of styles and ideologies produced during the last century” (2005b: 732). Due to the poverty of experience we lose a piece of the past, but that past, Benjamin seems to suggest, was perhaps not really worth saving. This poverty stimulates the creative, barbarian spirits to look forward, rejecting—to borrow Benjamin’s words—the “traditional solemn, noble image of man, festooned with all the sacrificial offerings of the past,” and turning “to the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present” (733).⁹ The end of experience as we knew it frees modern man from the burden of tradition and occasions a clean start.

The dissolution of experience and the decreasing “graspability” of the world as a concomitant of modernity had also been noticed by other authors.¹⁰ For Benjamin, however, the end of experience as we know it does not mean the end of experience as such. Modernity and its technological developments introduce new modes of experiencing

⁸ Notably, the same ambiguity surrounds Benjamin’s attitude towards the loss of the artwork’s aura in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin’s notion of the “aura” has attracted contradictory interpretive approaches: while certain critics view Benjamin as a nostalgic who laments the loss of aura, many argue that Benjamin greets this development with the hope and anticipation of a new kind of political art that could counter the threat of fascism and give rise to new forms of experience and knowledge. I side with the latter interpretation.

⁹ Benjamin makes this point in relation to the work of Paul Klee, Adolf Loos, and Paul Scheerbart, who for him embody this creative, forward-looking spirit. It is noteworthy that Loos, whom Benjamin counts among the “good barbarians,” is for Theodor Adorno an example of barbarism too, but in a negative sense. According to Adorno, the merging of aesthetic beauty and real purposiveness (what he calls the “literalization” of art), as he sees it take place in the architectural theory of Loos, is barbaric. “Das Barbarische ist das Buchstäbliche” [“The barbaric is the literal”], he writes in *Ästhetische Theorie* (97; also qtd in McLaughlin 7). Buildings built to serve non-artistic purposes are not aesthetically significant to him. In this context, barbarism for Adorno becomes synonymous with functionality in architecture. What Adorno sees as barbaric is barbaric for Benjamin too—but in a positive sense: this functionality is the source of aesthetic renewal and innovation. See McLaughlin 7.

¹⁰ Van Alphen mentions, for example, Charles Baudelaire, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Paul Celan (2007: 341–42). On the same issue, see Baer, *Remnants of Song* (2001).

and knowing the world. Although “Experience and Poverty” does not explicitly address these new modes, Benjamin’s introduction of a new, positive barbarism in this essay, I argue, suggests a renewed notion of experience as well.

This new experience is elaborated in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” which explores how technologically reproducible forms of art challenge the viewer and shift perception.¹¹ With the technological developments of modernity, as Ernst van Alphen remarks, the loss of experience is related to an excess of stimuli: the subject is overwhelmed by sensory impressions and is exposed to novel sensations (2007: 341-43). Benjamin notices in “The Work of Art,” for example, that the advent of film has transformed our experience by shifting attention to previously almost imperceptible details. The use of the close-up and of slow motion to expand space and extend movement is a case in point (1999b: 229). Unknown aspects of reality are revealed, and what was once familiar now becomes estranged, as the camera introduces the viewer to “unconscious optics” (230). Moreover, Benjamin observes that with new media, and especially film, reception takes place mainly in a state of distraction, as opposed to the deep concentration art traditionally demanded (232-33). The viewer now attains insights through discontinuous impressions rather than controlled and rational observation.¹² Once more, just as with poverty of experience and barbarism, Benjamin breaks with the conventional meaning of “distraction.” Instead of being a negative signifier, for him—and at that moment in history—it embodies a new mode of knowing, which can be just as productive (if not more) as conscious, contemplative observation.

In “The Work of Art,” by approaching the changes imposed by new media and art forms on traditional art and its reception, Benjamin reacts to the objectives of fascism. The underlying aspiration of Benjamin’s thesis in “The Work of Art” is to counter the fascist aestheticization of politics by politicizing aesthetics (1999b: 235).¹³ Fascism, as Eduardo Cadava argues, seeks to “stage the nonpolitical essence of the political” by making the autonomy of art into the “truth of the political” (47). For Benjamin, the fascist “introduction of aesthetics into political life” can only culminate in war and its aesthetic apotheosis (“Work of Art,” 1999b: 234).¹⁴ This alienates mankind from itself to such a

¹¹ The first version of the “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” was written between autumn and December 1935. The second version was composed between the end of 1935 and the beginning of February 1936. The third and last version is dated between spring 1936 and March/April 1939.

¹² For the issue of distraction (in Benjamin and others) and its significance in modernity, see van Alphen’s “Configurations of Self: Modernism and Distraction” (2007).

¹³ See also Cadava 47 and Düttmann 36.

¹⁴ The aestheticization of war finds its literary expression in the movement of Futurism and especially in Marinetti’s manifesto on the Ethiopian colonial war—an ode to the beauty of war, parts of which Benjamin quotes in the “Epilogue” of his “Work of Art” essay. The actual reasons for the fascist beautification of war, however, are not purely aesthetic. According to Benjamin, the real reasons lie in the fact that war “can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale” and “makes it possible to mobilize all of today’s technical resources” while in both cases maintaining “the traditional property system” (1999b: 234).

degree, that “it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (235). The destruction of the unity and authenticity of art, and the end of its function as ritual in modernity, deprive art of its aura and can thereby sabotage the fascist attempt to use art for “redirecting the technical apparatus to the production of ritual values” (Werneburg and Phillips 45). Restoring the artwork’s aura is thus a crucial component of the fascist project. In the face of this project, Benjamin suggests a mobilization of aesthetic production towards political ends. This is why he sees a revolutionary potential in new forms of art and their destruction of the aura.¹⁵

In this sense, new artistic media such as film could be seen as part of the project of “positive barbarism” in “Experience and Poverty,” which is also meant to confront the barbarism of fascism in the year 1933. Benjamin’s project, however, does not only call upon new art forms. Existing art forms that have redefined themselves as a result of new media and technological advancements can also be part of the same project. The architecture of Adolf Loos, the paintings of Paul Klee, the works of Dadaists, and the literature of Paul Scheerbarth are for Benjamin cases in point. These names figure among the great minds that Benjamin deems capable of carrying out this barbarian project.

Benjamin’s positive barbarism, either initiated through art or by other means, is called to challenge the destructive movement of the “old” barbarism. The latter barbarism is not only manifest in the threat of fascism in 1933, but has always accompanied the forces of civilization in history. As Benjamin remarks in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “[t] here is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (1999b: 248). The wonders of civilization do not just owe their existence to the “great minds and talents,” but also to “the anonymous toil of their contemporaries” (248). Benjamin’s much-quoted statement points to civilization’s dependence on its margins—people excluded by history, the colonized, the slaves, the workers, the proletariat, the masses. The paradox that “civilization” is grounded in a perpetual violence against its inferior others locates barbarism in the heart of the civilized construct.

Benjamin’s famous dictum exposes civilization as an irrational construct that has to exert barbaric violence to safeguard “civilization.” The same apparent contradiction is found in other thinkers too. Marx notes the contradiction between the essence of the modern state (reason) and its existence (unreason) and sees a clash between the State’s “theoretical definition and its real hypotheses.”¹⁶ The state cannot sustain itself on the basis of reason, even if it is ideologically founded on it. In practice, it exercises irrationality, violence, and barbarism, which alienate the State from its foundation (reason), while they ensure its preservation. Ludwig Feuerbach, who laid the foundations for Marxist thought, saw this contradiction not simply as irrational, but—like Benjamin—as a necessary connection

¹⁵ See also Cadava 47.

¹⁶ Marx qtd in Althusser 1969: 225.

between reason (the idea of the State) and unreason (its irrational, barbaric reality).¹⁷ As Louis Althusser argues in “Marxism and Humanism,” unreason is not simply the opposite of reason but an “indispensable moment” in the realization of reason.¹⁸ In other words, civilization cannot be thought separately from barbarism; it needs barbarism not only for its theoretical self-definition by negation, but also for its actualization.

Benjamin’s belief in the inextricability of barbarism from civilization, in combination with the growing force of fascism at the time, seems to leave no way out of barbarism. For Benjamin, the escape from this impasse will have to come from within the notion of barbarism: stealing the concept away from fascism, disappropriating it, and recasting it as a positive force for a new project. In this way, the concept returns with a vengeance to hit fascism in the face. The instrument of the enemy turns into a strategy of resistance, survival, and construction: a strategy that allows one to destroy, clear the ground, and then begin “with a little and build up further” (“Experience and Poverty,” 1999b: 732).

But if this new barbarism that Benjamin proposes engages destruction, how is it *radically* different from the barbarism of the enemy? In order to come to this question, I first have to address another one: is “barbarism” really the name Benjamin gives to this strategy? Does he use the same name for his positive barbarism as that of the traditional (let us call it) “negative barbarism”?

Benjamin’s Three Barbarisms

In order to answer this question, I first seek out other instances in Benjamin’s work where he employs the term “barbarism” in a negative sense. A striking case is Benjamin’s well-known statement, which I discussed in the previous section:

There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. (1999b: 248)

In German the text reads:

Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der *Barbarei* zu sein.” (GS I, vol. 2, 696, emphasis added)¹⁹

Let us now read again, this time in German, the sentence wherein Benjamin introduces his new barbarism in “Experience and Poverty:”

Diese Erfahrungsarmut ist Armut nicht nur an privaten sondern an Menschheitserfahrungen überhaupt. Und damit eine Art von neuem *Barbarentum*.

¹⁷ Feuerbach in Althusser 1969: 225.

¹⁸ Feuerbach’s views on the “humanism of alienation” are presented in Althusser 1969: 225.

¹⁹ The abbreviation GS in this chapter stands for *Gesammelte Schriften*.

Barbarentum? In der Tat. Wir sagen es, um einen neuen, positiven Begriff des *Barbarentums* einzuführen. (GS II, vol. 1, 215, emphasis added)

In the first case, the term used is “Barbarei,” while in the second case, “Barbarentum.” In the English edition of these texts both terms are translated as “barbarism.” A literal translation of “Barbarentum” in English would give us something like “barbarianness” or “barbarianhood.”²⁰

Neither “barbarianhood” nor “barbarianness” are existing words listed in dictionaries. Surprisingly, I have not been able to find “Barbarentum” in contemporary or older German dictionaries either, but for one exception: “Barbarentum” is only mentioned in volume three of the revised edition of the *Deutsches Fremdwörterbuch* by Hans Schulz and Otto Basler (1997).²¹ In this dictionary, “Barbarei” is a separate entry extending over six pages (131–36), while “Barbarentum” is listed as a derivative of “Barbar” and receives only a short explication of one paragraph. It is also notable that “Barbarentum” only appears in a “Fremdwörterbuch” [dictionary of foreign words], which could indicate its foreign sound in German. Based on this information, I deduce that “Barbarentum” is not only a foreignism, but also, judging from its absence from dictionaries (exceptions notwithstanding), a very uncommon word, which has not been standardized in German.

In this sense, its usage and status in German differs greatly from that of “Barbarei,” which is listed in all dictionaries as the standard noun derived from “Barbar” and as the proper opposite of “Kultur.” If we consider its rarity, archaic sound, foreign roots,

²⁰ While in the English translation no distinction is made between “Barbarei” and “Barbarentum,” there are translations in other languages that maintain the distinction. For example, the Dutch translator uses the terms “barbaarsheid” and “barbarendom” for “Barbarei” and “Barbarentum” respectively. The translator does not translate “Barbarentum” with “barbarij” or “barbaarsheid” (common Dutch terms for barbarism) but opts for a literal translation of “Barbarentum” with “barbarendom” (Benjamin 1996). Remarkably, “barbarendom” is not an official word in Dutch dictionaries either, although it is occasionally used in Dutch. The only related entries I could find in Dutch dictionaries were: “barbarisme,” “barbaarsheid,” and “barbarij”—nowhere “barbarendom.”

²¹ Based on my research in major German dictionaries, the most common entry for “barbarism” is “Barbarei,” which appears in all dictionaries I consulted and is generally defined as the opposite of civilization or culture. The second most common entry is “Barbarismus” (a mistake or foreign element in language). “Barbarentum” is hardly used in German nowadays and, whenever employed, it has an archaic sound to it. According to the 1997 edition of Schulz and Basler’s dictionary, since the end of the eighteenth century “Barbarentum” was used to denote the amount and distribution of foreigners in an area. Later in the nineteenth century, “Barbarentum” was used to signify primitivism, or, in the context of progressive models, a less-advanced state or a social formation. Finally, according to the same dictionary, in early twentieth-century usage the word was a synonym of “Barbarei” signifying “tyranny” (“Gewaltherrschaft des politischen Gegners”), and, in particular, the dictatorship of the national socialists in collocations such as “das Deutsche Barbarentum” (Schulz and Basler 125). This could suggest that Benjamin opposes his positive “Barbarentum” not only to “Barbarei,” but also to this particular use of “Barbarentum.” I do not have any evidence on whether this use of “Barbarentum” was common at the time. However, considering the established and widespread use of “Barbarei” in German to refer to Nazi violence, and given that in the rest of Benjamin’s writings the barbarism associated with fascism is expressed with the term “Barbarei,” I contend that his positive “Barbarentum” is more likely to speak back to the term “Barbarei.”

and “improper” status (its exclusion from dictionaries), “Barbarentum” could even be seen as a “barbarism” according to the second meaning of the word: a “foreignism” or “expression not accepted as part of the current standard, such as neologisms, hybrid derivatives, obsolete or provincial expressions.”²² It is most likely no coincidence that Benjamin chooses a non-standard term to baptize his positive barbarism: a term less historically charged than “Barbarei” is easier to reinvent, resignify, and invest with a new philosophical and political project.

By opting for another term than “Barbarei” Benjamin makes a clear distinction between his positive barbarism and the barbarism implied in “Barbarei.” In “Experience and Poverty,” Benjamin’s “Barbarentum” poses as a challenge to “Barbarei.” Since, to my knowledge, Benjamin does not use “Barbarentum” anywhere else, we may infer that in the context of his writings “Barbarentum” is a new word, invested with the potential to disrupt the workings of “Barbarei” in language and in the social and political world. Therefore, I will—somewhat catachrestically—refer to “Barbarei” as the “old” or “negative barbarism” to contrast it to the newness that “Barbarentum” encompasses.²³ In Benjamin’s essay, “Barbarentum” emerges not as a synonym of “Barbarei” but as a different concept altogether.

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History” as well as in *The Arcades Project* Benjamin uses “Barbarei” to address the inextricability of barbarism from civilization or culture.²⁴

²² Webster’s *New International Dictionary* (1913).

²³ Referring to the “old” or “negative” barbarism in this chapter in contradistinction to Benjamin’s “positive barbarism” is, of course, a generalized and catachrestic use of the term. As shown in the previous chapter, the “old” barbarism (here encompassed by “Barbarei”) is not a monolithic concept in history, but has a complex genealogy with plural connotations and functions. However, in history barbarism remains a principally negative signifier, and its dominant uses place it in constant opposition to a positive notion of civilization. Therefore, my reference to the “old, negative” barbarism here expresses the dominant traditional valuation of the concept.

²⁴ The barbarism within culture is not only pointed out in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” but also in a fragment from *The Arcades Project*, from a slightly different perspective:

Barbarism lurks in the very concept of culture—as the concept of a fund of values which is considered independent, not, indeed, of the production process in which these values originated, but of the one in which they survive. In this way they serve the apotheosis of the latter <word uncertain>, barbaric as it may be. (1999a, 467-68, N5a, 7)

The German reads:

Die Barbarei steckt im Begriff der Kultur selbst: als dem von einem Schatze von Werten, der unabhängig von dem, in welchem sie entstanden, aber unabhängig von dem, in welchem sie überdauern, betrachtet wird. Sie dienen auf diese Weise der Apotheose des letz<t>ern <?>, wie barbarisch der immer sein mag. (GS, vol. 6, 584)

The statement is rather cryptic, especially due to its fragmentariness and lack of context. Benjamin seems to find barbarism in the alienation of values from the production process in which they are being consumed at a specific historical moment. “Barbarei” here appears to refer to the refusal to critically reflect on the values that one has internalized in a social system. As a result, values become reified within a culture that greets them as unchanging possessions instead of mobile entities, dependent on the changing context of their production and consumption. The same fragment from *The Arcades Project* is somewhat reformulated in Benjamin’s essay “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian” (1937). The term “Barbarei” is not used in that quote, but the same condition is purely ascribed

In "Experience and Poverty," he employs the unusual term "Barbarentum" for a positive barbarian project that tries to break with the genealogy of "Barbarei." Apart from "Barbarei" and "Barbarentum," however, there is a third barbarism in Benjamin's writings: "Barbarismus," which is the German term for linguistic barbarism, denoting a linguistic error or foreign, unconventional locution. This third barbarism appears in the "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in relation to Dadaism. The barbarisms ("Barbarismen") that, according to Benjamin, are "abundant in Dadaism" denote "the extravagances and crudities of art," which "appear, particularly in the so-called decadent epochs" (1999b: 230).²⁵ As an art form, Dadaism aspired to certain effects that could not be fully realized at the time, but only later, with new technical developments and in a new art form: film (230). According to Benjamin, Dadaist works, whether textual, visual, or both, were scandalous and obscene. They used mundane materials, they were utterly useless for conventional contemplation, they caused "vehement distraction," and they destroyed their own aura by being displayed as reproductions. In their aspirations, Benjamin argues, and especially in their distracting elements and tactile quality, Dadaist works were (unwittingly) "promoting a demand for the film," although they denounced the market values typical of the film industry (231).

The barbarisms Benjamin sees in Dadaism can thus be delineated as follows: extravagances, crudities, erratic, unexpected or shocking elements, and artistic effects that deviate from a certain artistic tradition and set of expectations, and cannot be fully realized, absorbed, and appreciated at the time of their creation, because the (technical) means for their full realization do not yet exist. These barbarisms anticipate something new—possibly a new art emerging through a distorted and transformed version of the old. As such, they are elements of a new language, which is not yet intelligible or fully formed.²⁶ Notably, for Benjamin these barbarisms are also defined by a lack of intentionality

to the concept of "Kultur": "The concept of culture—as the embodiment of creations considered independent, if not of the production process in which they originate, then of a production process in which they continue to survive—has a fetishistic quality. Culture appears reified" (2006: 267). In the context of the latter essay, it becomes clearer that Benjamin sees barbarism (in the "negative" sense) in the reification of culture—in "the disintegration of culture into goods" that become objects of possession (267). The barbarism of this bourgeois fetishism prevents people from having any form of genuine experience.

²⁵ The relevant passage in German reads: "Die Geschichte jeder Kunstform hat kritische Zeiten, in denen diese Form auf Effekte hindrängt, die sich zwanglos erst bei einem veränderten technischen Standard, d. h. in einer neuen Kunstform ergeben können. Die derart, zumal in den sogenannten Verfallszeiten, sich ergebenden Extravaganzen und Kruditäten der Kunst gehen in Wirklichkeit aus ihrem reichsten historischen Kräftenzentrum hervor. Von solchen *Barbarismen* hat noch zuletzt der dadaismus gestrotzt" (GS I, vol. 2, 501, emphasis added).

²⁶ Another use of the concept of barbarism, which bears similarities with the way Benjamin describes "Barbarismen" in "The Work of Art," appears in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*] (1928). In his preface, "Trauerspiel" is labeled as "strange or even barbaric" (1985, 49-50; GS I, vol. 1, 230). Scholars see "Trauerspiel" as a "caricature" or a "misunderstanding" of classical tragedy, whereas Benjamin sees it "according to the peculiar logic of 'renewal or rebirth in decline'" (Benjamin qtd in McLaughlin 11). In "The Work of Art," Benjamin places "Barbarismen"

(Dadaism “was not conscious of such intentions”) (231). This does not mean that the Dadaists did not intend to achieve certain effects with their works—they certainly did. But the “barbarisms” Benjamin talks about involve the unintended and unpredictable effects of their works, which were fully materialized only later, in other art forms. The effects of these barbarisms are not planned or measured beforehand; they form “an errant site of error,” heralding a future “barbarian” language, the rules and grammar of which do not yet exist.²⁷

The way Benjamin uses and defines “Barbarismen” in “The Work of Art” places this third kind of barbarism in the vicinity of the project of “Barbarentum.” In his article “Benjamin’s Barbarism,” Kevin McLaughlin goes so far as to argue that the positive barbarism in “Experience and Poverty” is in fact indistinguishable from such a literal, linguistic barbarism. Experience, according to McLaughlin, is generally understood in Benjamin as a matter of language, and the poverty of experience should therefore also be addressed in linguistic terms (11-12). Because experiential poverty in Benjamin has a linguistic basis, McLaughlin’s argument goes, Benjamin’s concept of positive barbarism in this essay should also be read in terms of a literal (linguistic) barbarism. McLaughlin not only equates poverty of experience with barbarism, but he also signifies Benjamin’s “Barbarentum” as linguistic barbarism: “Barbarism transposes the concept of a collective experiential poverty onto language” (12).

Although I share McLaughlin’s emphasis on the role of linguistic barbarism in probing Benjamin’s concept of barbarism, McLaughlin’s interpretation, apparently based on Benjamin’s English translation, fails to consider how Benjamin’s word for “positive barbarism” is neither “Barbarismus” nor “Barbarei,” but a wholly different word: “Barbarentum.” McLaughlin’s study seems to presuppose that all uses of the notion of barbarism in Benjamin refer back to a single term. However, we cannot overlook the fact that we are dealing with different notions of barbarism in his writings, distinguished from each other not only conceptually, but also linguistically. It is remarkable that a study like McLaughlin’s, which takes linguistic (or “literal”) barbarism as the basis for the interpretation of Benjaminian barbarism in general, falls short of addressing the linguistic peculiarities (indeed, the linguistic barbarisms) surrounding the different versions of Benjamin’s barbarisms. This is even more curious if we consider that McLaughlin is an acclaimed translator of Benjamin.

Benjamin’s “Barbarentum” may be read in terms of linguistic barbarism, but its meaning and operations extend beyond the linguistic realm. For Benjamin, transformation starts with a radical renovation of language (the redeployment of “Barbarentum” is a

in art in the same context of decadent epochs. It is particularly during decadent or critical times that “the extravagances and crudities of art” (“Barbarismen”) thrive and give rise to new and revolutionary artistic forms (1999b: 230).

²⁷ The delineation of barbarism as an “errant site of error” comes from Gayatri Spivak, who alerted me to the unintentional quality of “barbarism.”

case in point), but “language” should be read broadly, as expression through different media. “All expression,” Benjamin asserts in his early essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” “insofar as it is a communication of contents of the mind, is to be classed as language. And expression, by its whole innermost nature, is certainly to be understood only as *language*” (2004: 62-63). Even the term “Barbarismus” in Benjamin exceeds its strict linguistic meaning as linguistic error or oddity. In the “Work of Art,” the term refers to “extravagances and crudities” not only in Dadaist texts, but also in visual works and in other artistic media.

The three barbarisms in Benjamin are distinct, but also intertwined. A mistake, crudity, or foreign element—as Benjamin describes “Barbarismus”—can enter a saturated code, tradition or form, and trigger the destruction and overcoming of the old “Barbarei” that always lurks in culture, thereby pursuing the project of positive barbarism (“Barbarentum”). A simple way to capture the relation between “Barbarei,” “Barbarentum,” and “Barbarismus” would be the following: if “Barbarentum” names the project that can counter and disrupt “Barbarei,” then “Barbarismen” can function as catalysts in this project; they can be (accidental) agents of destruction, change, and transformation. “Barbarentum” can thus be realized with the intervention of “Barbarismen,” but the relation between the two concepts is not necessary: “Barbarentum” is not only actualized through “Barbarismen,” and not every “Barbarismus” is automatically related to the project of “Barbarentum.”

Benjamin’s choice to articulate his project by means of a word other than “Barbarei” is easy to miss. The translator of the essay in English, Rodney Livingstone, overlooks the difference of “Barbarentum” by translating it with “barbarism.” This could partly be ascribed to the fact that there is no other word than “barbarism” in English. But the trap the text sets for the translator is enhanced by the addition of the adjective “neuem” [new] in front of “Barbarentum”: “Und damit eine Art von neuem Barbarentum.” The same adjective is repeated and supplemented by the adjective “positiven” in the passage that follows: “Barbarentum? In der Tat. Wir sagen es, um einen *neuen, positiven* Begriff des Barbarentums einzuführen” (GS II, vol. 1, 215, emphasis added). These adjectives cultivate the impression that the new or different element is not hidden in the word itself, but in the external attributes “neuem/neuen” and “positiven,” which distinguish this one from the “old,” “negative” barbarism. The word “Barbarentum” is wrapped in a conundrum: a different term lodging in the fortress of the old barbarism, visible to everyone, and yet opaque, hidden among surrounding attributes (“neuen,” “positiven”). Just like Edgar Allan Poe’s “Purloined Letter,” its difference is out there for everyone to see and yet invisible.

In the following, I will probe the implications of Benjamin’s choice to use a word different from “Barbarei,” as well as the function of the English translation of “Barbarentum” with “barbarism.” Benjamin’s “Barbarentum” and its translation articulate two different

projects with partly overlapping and partly diverging theoretical and political ramifications. In the first case (the German text), Benjamin uses an unusual term to name a concept that will throw a wrench into the workings of the “old” barbarism lodged within culture, and particularly the barbarism of fascism. In the second case (the translation of “Barbarenum”), the translator maintains the term “barbarism,” which in this context acquires a positive meaning, so that it can be put to use for new purposes. In the next two sections, I chart the two theoretical trajectories we can draw from Benjamin’s concept of “Barbarenum” and from its translation, respectively.

“Barbarenum” and Constructive Destruction

Benjamin’s choice to replace “Barbarei” with a less common word acquires additional significance in light of the transformative, creative force that Benjamin assigns to naming. For Benjamin, names do not refer to things or communicate information about things, but participate in the shaping and production of things.²⁸ In “Experience and Poverty” he addresses the immediacy of language as a means of creation by calling for a language that could change the world instead of just describe it. Benjamin offers two examples in which language assumes this transformative potential. The first concerns the literary creatures of Paul Scheerbarth, German author of fantastic novels and poems. These characters (which are human beings or “people,” but lack “humanlikeness”) speak a completely new language, which is “arbitrary” and “constructed,” as opposed to “organic language.” Even their names are non-human—an element that brings Benjamin to his second example: the “dehumanized” names some Russians give their children, such as “Aviakhim” (the name of an airline). In both cases, Benjamin writes, we have “[n]o technical renovation of language, but its mobilization in the service of struggle or work—at any rate, of *changing reality instead of describing it*” (2005b: 733, emphasis added).²⁹

²⁸ For the creative force of language in Benjamin, see Benjamin’s “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” as well as Bracken and Menninghaus. In “On Language as Such” Benjamin connects the creative nature of language with the creative act of God in *Genesis* and argues that at its origin language was meant to produce—not just describe. In *Genesis*, Benjamin contends, the creation of man does not explicitly have a material basis, but seems to be the product of language as such: “In this ‘Let there be’ and in the words ‘He named’ at the beginning and the end of the act, the deep and clear relation of the creative act to language appears each time. With the creative omnipotence of language it begins, and at the end language, as it were, assimilates the created, names it. Language is therefore both creative and the finished creation; it is word and name” (2004: 68). For an analysis of Benjamin’s “metaphysics” of language, see Hent de Vries 266–75.

²⁹ Benjamin’s call for “mobilization” echoes Ernst Jünger’s concept of “total mobilization,” which Benjamin explicitly refers to in his essay “Theories of German Fascism” (2005a: 318). Jünger, an intriguing and controversial figure in German literature and social theory, wrote an essay entitled “Total Mobilization,” which first appeared in the anthology *Krieg und Krieger* [War and Warrior], edited by Jünger himself in 1930. The essay studies the relationship between society, war, and technology, and can be seen as a prefiguration of totalitarian societies. His essay attracted critical reactions both from traditional conservatives and left-wing critics (such as Benjamin). Armitage remarks that for Jünger “the unique characteristic of the post-World War I period was the course of

What these two cases—Scheerbart's creatures and the new Russian names—have in common, are names that are not humanlike, but constructed, technical or inspired by technology. Why does Benjamin pick these examples to make a point about the transformation of reality through the mobilization of language? If, as Benjamin argues in "Experience and Poverty," modernity and new technological developments contradict experience and incapacitate the language that used to capture this experience, then the new poverty of experience also needs a new language of expression (not necessarily one of words).³⁰ Following the implications of Benjamin's aforementioned examples, this new language would not reproduce existing human(istic) forms and names, but it would name the human anew, through technology. It would try to reshape humanity through a constructed language inspired by technique and technological developments. Along these lines, Scheerbart's novels inquire "how our telescopes, our airplanes, our rockets can transform human beings as they have been up to now into *completely new, lovable, and interesting creatures*" ("Experience and Poverty," 2005b: 733, emphasis added).

The claim that dehumanized and technologized names might make humanity more human and humans more "lovable" sounds like another of Benjamin's paradoxical claims. But pointing out this effect in Scheerbart's novels could be a way of reversing the direction that the relationship between humans, technology, and nature was taking at the time Benjamin writes this essay. To elucidate this point, I will take a detour through another essay. In "Theories of German Fascism" (1930), a critical review of the German collection of essays *War and Warriors* edited by Ernst Jünger, Benjamin addresses the relation between technology and nature through the issue of war and the form it took after World War I. For the new German nationalists, technology, and especially the ways it was put to use in machine and gas warfare, "wanted to recreate the heroic features of German Idealism" (2005a: 319). But, Benjamin writes, "[i]t went astray"; even though "technology had the power to give nature its voice," it ended up reducing nature to silence and revealing nature's apocalyptic (and morbid) face (319). New German nationalism, according to Benjamin, believes that war can redeem the secret of nature through technology. But the only thing nature reveals through machine warfare is its most threatening, horrifying face. However, the secret of nature, Benjamin suggests, may be more effectively redeemed through "a technology mediated by the human scheme of things" (319). Although modern technology leads to the annihilation of humans and nature on a massive scale, fascism and its intellectuals not only hail this technology of

action involving the total mobilization of the state's military and social resources. In fact, in Jünger's terms, total mobilization firstly caused the end of nineteenth century limited war and what might be termed 'partial mobilization,' that is, of rigid demarcations between civilianization and militarization, and secondly brought about the downfall of the old European monarchies" (Armitage 194-95; Jünger 1993: 125).

³⁰ Benjamin's image of the World War I soldiers returning from the front in silence illustrates this impotence of the language of experience.

destruction as an aesthetic phenomenon; within the framework of German Idealism, they even exclude technology from the “human scheme of things” in order to elevate it to a sphere of gods and heroes. Benjamin also observes this “fascist apotheosis” of war in relation to the Futurist movement in the “Work of Art” (1999b: 234).

Because technology in this context is not human-like but rather god-like, it is excluded from human society. Bourgeois society, as Benjamin points out in “Theories of German Fascism,” deprives technology of its “right of determination in the social order” (2005a: 312). In the future, this may lead to a “slave revolt on the part of technology” (312). While on the one hand technology acquires a god-like or heroic status, dominating but also destroying human lives, on the other hand it has become a “slave”—a “barbarian other”—excluded from the human social order. Either way, technology is foreign to humanity. Instead of banning technology from the social, in “Experience and Poverty” Benjamin toys with the idea of letting technology reform people’s language. The acts of naming in the examples of Scheerbart and the Russians denaturalize human language through technology. But in doing so, they create the possibility of reshaping reality in a way that brings technology down to the human (and social) sphere again. Should this happen, then technology would cease to be the “other” of the human, located either beyond the human (as a god) or outside the human (as a barbarian).

By implicitly proposing a constructed language with non-humanlike names, Benjamin goes against the grain of humanism. Benjamin’s proposal appears to bring out the technical in the human instead of the human in the technical. However, I argue that it does both. Renaming the human through technology does not only redefine humanity, but also technology itself: technology is employed in the service of a better humanity, while it also helps construct this improved humanity. Since both the human and the technological are in need of transformation, what Benjamin’s examples propose is a two-way street.³¹

³¹ Benjamin’s ideas on the mobilization of language in “Experience and Poverty” also echo Jünger’s famous work *Der Arbeiter* [The Worker], published in 1932, shortly before Benjamin wrote “Experience and Poverty.” In it, Jünger sought to explain the crisis of the post-war bourgeois society from a nationalist, right-wing perspective. The crisis of the European civilization after World War I was intensified by a total disorder brought about by the destructive force of technology (Werneburg and Phillips 48). Jünger saw technology as the only force not subject to crisis and disintegration. And since he saw no alternative to technological civilization, he pleaded for an assimilation and utilization of the forces of technology for a “revolutionary nationalism” (Werneburg and Phillips 47). In this context, Jünger’s figure of the “total work-character” embodies social transformation and even a new form of humanity, consisting of highly functionalized and non-individualized, non-differentiated human beings (Jünger 1932: 100; Werneburg and Phillips 48-49). Jünger’s ideas here come close to Benjamin’s thoughts in “Experience and Poverty,” although it is certainly not the same “revolutionary nationalism” that Benjamin has in mind when he proposes a “mobilization” of language. If technology is given the right to participate in the act of naming—which is an act of creation—Benjamin hopes that the new nascent humanity will not be Jünger’s automated non-individualized workers, but perhaps more like Scheerbart’s “completely new, lovable, and interesting creatures.” Benjamin goes along with Jünger’s idea of mobilization, but aspires to subvert Jünger’s desired outcome.

Through these examples, Benjamin's essay envisions a language that embraces the poverty of experience in modernity in order to use technology for reinventing humanity. Dehumanizing language could help rehumanize the human. In this way, the potentially destructive power of technology could take a constructive direction. The relation of humans to nature would also be reshaped: nature could revoke its heinous, apocalyptic face with the help of a "technology mediated by the human scheme of things" ("Theories of German Fascism," 2005a: 319). Reinventing language based on the new conditions of modernity would not only disrupt the fascist conception of the relation between technology, humanity and nature, but could also create a language able to respond to the new kinds of experience that modernity has generated.

In the examples from "Experience and Poverty," the acts of naming call attention to the artificiality of the relation between name and thing. When a child is named "Aviakhim," for example, no illusion of an organic relation between the child and the name of an airline can be sustained. This relation is not organic or natural, but constructed *in* the act of naming. "[W]hat is crucial about this language," Benjamin writes when discussing the language of Scheerbart's characters, "is its arbitrary, constructed nature, in contrast to organic language" (2005b: 733). Naming as an act becomes essential for the mobilization of the creative energies of language and the transformation of reality.

The new language "Experience and Poverty" anticipates utilizes odd terms and reshuffles the relation of names to things in the hope of changing reality. This language is indispensable to the project of "Barbarentum." Conversely, "Barbarentum" can also be seen as the product of a creative act of (re)naming. Benjamin baptizes his barbarian project with a different name and, in doing so, remolds "Barbarei" in an attempt to stall its deterministic course. Benjamin not only distinguishes his positive barbarism from "Barbarei" but he challenges "Barbarei" *linguistically*, as much as he does conceptually.

In Benjamin's "Barbarentum," the nominalizing suffix "-tum" aspires to counter the exclusionary and violent workings of "Barbarei," in which the emphasis is on the ostracism of barbarian others or their exploitation within civilization. Instead of exclusion, alienation, or hierarchical power relations, "-tum" conveys the sense of a community or collectivity of new barbarians joined together in a common project. The suffix "-tum" is often used to denote a collectivity, as is the case with "Judentum." In that respect, the translation with "barbarianhood" comes closer than "barbarianness" (and certainly closer than "barbarism") to grasping the communal sense in "Barbarentum." The suffix "-hood" is often used for a group sharing a common characteristic or conveys a sense of bonding.³² Given the connotations of the suffix "-tum," Benjamin's "Barbarentum" functions as a critique to the collective identity the national socialists attempted to foster (based on exclusion and violence) by proposing another kind of "barbarian collective"

³² Compare terms like "brotherhood," "sisterhood," "parenthood," or the communal sense implied in "neighborhood."

with alternative modes of governance and togetherness. The new barbarians comprising this collectivity are human beings in possession of a radical and creative spirit. But the agents of “Barbarentum” need not always be human subjects: these agents can also be the barbarisms of new technologies and artistic media, in which Benjamin sees the hope for new forms of experience in a new language.

Although Benjamin uses “Barbarentum” as a reaction to the negative and exclusionary operations of “Barbarei,” his term does not fully transmute negativity into positivity. The negativity of “Barbarei”—and perhaps also of the existing meanings of “Barbarentum,” despite its infrequent use—still accompanies his new barbarian concept. However, this negativity is not the sole defining feature of his new barbarism (or “barbarianhood”). In the concept Benjamin develops under the name “Barbarentum,” the negative and destructive sides of barbarism are not all-encompassing, but become a prerequisite for the creative aspect of “Barbarentum” to take effect. Radical newness emerges through destruction. “Among the great creative spirits,” Benjamin writes, “there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a tabula rasa.” This “clearing” often presupposes the destruction of the old, in order “to start from scratch; to make a new start” (“Experience and Poverty,” 2005b: 732). Benjamin’s recasting of barbarism aspires to steal the “energies of barbarism from the fascists, and to reverse the conventional valuations of creativity and destruction” (McCole 157). In his new barbarism, destruction and creation are not absolute opposites, but found in a relation of tension and complementarity: they cannot be thought together in a harmonious relation, but they also cannot be thought separately.

The positivity of “Barbarentum” is a potential—a *promise* that sees destruction of the old as necessary, because it *may* lead to a new start. The positivity of barbarism is therefore not given in an unproblematic manner: it springs out of a constant negotiation and tension with negativity, destruction, and violence. Moreover, this positivity does not affirm and preserve what is, but questions everything in its path. This matches the course of action of “The Destructive Character” (1931), an essay in which, I argue, Benjamin elaborates the features of the new barbarian, which are only briefly sketched in “Experience and Poverty.”

In the “Destructive Character,” the process of creating possibilities through destruction is laid out in the following terms:

The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too, he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Not always by brute force; sometimes by the most refined. Because he sees ways everywhere, he always stands at a crossroads. No moment can know what

the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble—not for the sake of rubble, but for that of the way leading through it. (2005b: 542)³³

The word that catches my attention in the above passage is “everywhere.” Benjamin repeats it four times: three times to emphasize that the destructive character “sees ways everywhere” and once to point out that he “has to clear things from it everywhere.” The function of “everywhere” here could be elucidated through Jacques Derrida’s notion of “tout dire,” which Derrida relates to what he calls “the institution of literature.” For Derrida, “tout dire” is “both to ‘say everything,’ with a sense of exhausting a totality, and to ‘say anything,’ i.e., to speak without constraints on what one may say” (1992: 36). Literature is the institution “which allows one to *say everything, in every way,*” gathering “all figures into one another” but also breaking out of prohibitions: “the law of literature tends, in principle, to defy or lift the law” (36). “Tout dire” entails an absolute and radical freedom to say everything and anything—things unsayable, not said, not yet said, or not yet sayable. But this lack of limits can also produce the most offensive, abominable, injurious utterances. Thus, it is an act of unforeseeable consequences.

Benjamin’s “destructive character,” I contend, follows the same principle. In this case, we should perhaps talk about “tout faire” instead of “tout dire.” The distinction is in any case not absolute, since “tout dire” also implies a form of acting: it performs linguistic acts, or—to cite the book title in which Derrida’s “tout dire” appears—“acts of literature.” Since the destructive character sees ways everywhere, the future is radically open: “No moment can know what the next will bring” (2005b: 542). This unconditionality creates wide a spectrum of possible futures, but also contains the risk of creating monsters instead of angels of change. Accordingly, Benjamin’s “Barbarentum,” just like all truly radical gestures, offers no guarantee that it will indeed lead to the desired outcome. There is always risk: the project may take a different and even nightmarish direction, and destruction may be the only thing left.

The destructive character, as Irving Wohlfarth remarks, is a “historical gamble.” He takes a risk that needs to be taken, because at the historical moment wherein Benjamin finds himself there is so much at stake. “Abandoning disputed territory,” Wohlfarth notes, “for fear of operating in the vicinity of the enemy meant, on this view, withdrawing to defences that were bound to be overrun” (163). By endorsing heavily charged concepts such as “destruction” and “barbarism” Benjamin plunges into the heart of this “disputed territory,” striving to wrest these notions from the enemy’s camp.

This brings me back to the question I posed earlier in this study: if positive barbarism endorses destruction, how does Benjamin’s concept radically differ from fascist barbarism

³³ There are Nietzschean echoes in Benjamin’s figure of the destructive character. Compare, for example, the following quote from *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1885): “Neue Wege gehe ich, eine neue Rede kommt mir; müde wurde ich, gleich allen Schaffenden, der alten Zungen. Nicht will mein Geist mehr auf abgelaufenen Sohlen wandeln” (1994: 84).

and destruction? How can Benjamin construe a positive notion of destruction or barbarism that is not simultaneously a sinister foreshadowing of fascist violence? To answer this, I scrutinize the relation between destruction and positive barbarism in Benjamin. A sentence from "The Destructive Character" is telling in this respect: "What exists he reduces to rubble—not for the sake of rubble, but for that of the way leading through it" (2005b: 542). It is worth juxtaposing this sentence to a statement from "Theories of German Fascism." Benjamin argues that the new theories of war thriving among German nationalists after World War I were nothing but "an uninhibited translation of the principles of *l'art pour l'art* to war itself" (2005a: 314). The above two statements imply two kinds of destruction: in fascism, destruction takes place for the sake of destruction (in imitation of *l'art pour l'art*), while Benjamin's destructive character destroys "not for the sake of rubble," but with an eye for the possibilities ("the way") opened through this act; destruction is not an end in itself, but a means of creating hope for redemption.

The destructive character is therefore not a Romantic nihilist, wishing to reduce everything to nothing without motive or purpose, but, as Wohlfarth calls him, an "*effective nihilist*," who—in Hegel's words—"enters into his opponent's strength in order to destroy him from within."³⁴ Benjamin's destructive character destroys in the hope of redeeming humanity rather than letting fascism lead to total destruction.

But destruction for Benjamin is more than an attempt to get back at fascist violence or strike against tradition and the oppressive bourgeois society. After all, the destructive character's "need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred" ("The Destructive Character," 2005b: 541). Destroying is first of all necessary in order to clear the way: "The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away." However, the destructive character is not a creator: "the only work he avoids is creative" (542). Here, I contend, we find a crucial difference between the "destructive character" and the "barbarian" in Benjamin. The barbarian does not just try to prevent another kind of violence, but destroys with the intention of constructing something new. This dimension is highlighted in "Experience and Poverty," where the figure of the barbarian is surrounded by an architectural vocabulary: the barbarian is a destroyer, but also a constructor, who prefers to start from scratch "and *build up* further." The "great *creative* spirits" mentioned as examples of barbarians are those who clear a tabula rasa and then "need a drawing table; they were *constructors*" (2005b: 732, emphasis added). The destructive character could thus be seen as the first step in a process that the barbarians take further by engaging in what we may call *constructive destruction*. The destructive character destroys to clear the ground; the barbarian not only destroys, but creates anew.

³⁴ Hegel's words are quoted in Benjamin's essay "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" (2006: 270); see "Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker" in *GS II*, vol. 2, 481; also qtd in Wohlfarth 163. Benjamin quotes Hegel to refer to the eristic dialectic ("eristische Dialektik"), which, according to Hegel's definition, "in die Kraft des Gegners eingeht, um ihn von innen her zu vernichten."

But in exactly what kind of destruction does the barbarian engage? And even if the barbarian destroys to create anew, how can the idea of the unreserved, cheerful destroyer of all traces be compatible with Benjamin, the tireless collector of past traces? How could Benjamin suggest a complete elimination of tradition—he, the collector who “gathers his fragments and scraps from the debris of the past,” whose ideal work was one consisting only of quotations, and who dedicated himself to collecting excerpts of old and new texts, tearing them out of their context and “arranging them afresh in such a way that they illustrated one another and were able to prove their *raison d’être* in a free-floating state,” in the manner of a “surrealistic montage”? (Arendt 50-51). Once more, we stumble upon one of the contradictions and ambivalences of Benjamin’s writing. In my view, what Benjamin has in mind is not a complete erasure of the contents of tradition and of the past as such. Instead, destruction can be seen as an uprooting of the authoritative function of tradition in the present and a transformation of the relation of tradition with the here-and-now.

Benjamin wants the barbarian “to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further” (2005b: 732). If we put the emphasis on “a little,” we detect a small hesitation to annihilate the past altogether—perhaps the dedicated collector’s instinct is making a subtle, subconscious manifestation amidst the barbarian’s destructive drive. But the figures of the barbarian and the collector need not be placed in opposing camps. Even if the collector makes tradition his field, in fact he goes against tradition. While tradition is grounded in the authority of the past and values the classifiable qualities of objects in order to make hierarchical distinctions, Benjamin’s collector evens out hierarchical orderings and privileges the uniqueness of each object. What matters is that which makes the object new and part of the present, even if it was created years or centuries ago.³⁵ “The genuine picture,” writes Benjamin, “may be old, but the genuine thought is new. It is of the present. This present might be meager, granted. But no matter what it is like, one must firmly take it by the horns to be able to consult the past” (Benjamin qtd in Arendt 48-49). It is from the present that the authority of tradition can be challenged and overthrown. As Benjamin writes in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (1999b: 247). The present decides, as it were, which fragments of the past are worth saving.

Although with positive barbarism the emphasis shifts to clearing traces instead of collecting them, this act of clearing is not blind annihilation. It is directed against “the oppressive wealth of ideas,” the “horrific mishmash of styles and ideologies produced during the last century,” the overloaded bourgeois interior, the overwhelming “culture” that people have devoured: all those traces that hinder authentic thought and experience.³⁶

³⁵ For the relation of the collector with tradition, see Arendt 48-49.

³⁶ Wohlfarth argues that Benjamin is not against “authentic” traces, but rather pleads for the destruction of their secondary substitutes, the dreadful accumulation of which can be seen in the

Destruction, then, could refer to the blasting of a deceptive form of experience in order to construct new relations to objects. Objects are “destroyed” by being wrenched from their established context and placed in novel configurations, which can produce new modes of knowing.³⁷

The difference between oppressive tradition and constructive destruction is captured in “The Destructive Character” as follows: “Some people pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them; others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called the destructive” (2005b: 542). The latter practice refers to the “good” kind of destruction in Benjamin. Fascist destruction, on the other hand, is based on, and limited by, the former principle of conservation. Therefore, as Alexander García Düttmann also points out, fascist destruction is not radical *enough* (35). According to Düttmann, fascism finds its condition of possibility in destruction, but does not allow itself to get carried away by total destruction (40). The barbarism of fascism does not seek the destruction of tradition, but its preservation—together with the conservation of capitalism. It destroys in order to secure its status quo and its future and prevent any other future from taking place. Fascist destruction seeks delimitation, while the destruction motivated by positive barbarism strives for openness. This is why the latter is vulnerable and excessive.³⁸ Positive barbarism destroys tradition by cancelling its authoritative function and rethinking the role of the past in the present.³⁹ For the barbarian, tradition is not a prison cell, but a toolbox to construct different futures.

The term “Barbarentum” in “Experience and Poverty” is, in my view, paradigmatic in capturing this complex relation between tradition and destruction. The whole essay is structured as a dialectics between different pairs: (richness of) experience and poverty, human and non-human/technological, old and new, tradition and destruction, and positive and negative barbarism. At first glance, there seems to be no place for an outside to this structure of doubles—a third element that challenges this dialectics. However, I argue that the other appears in the text as the minimal remainder of the passage from the old “Barbarei” to a new “Barbarentum”: the suffix of the “negative” barbarism (the *-ei* of “Barbarei”) disappears as the suffix “-tum” takes its place (or, in English, “barbarianhood” instead of the violent *-ism* of “barbarism”). The only trace that remains from “Barbarei” is the “barbar”—the unintelligible mumblings of a foreign language, which escape the destructive force of the new barbarism to become the starting point for the formation of “Barbarentum.”

artificial paradise of the bourgeois interior (172). Based on that, one may argue that the barbarian destroys the secondary traces, while the collector gathers authentic ones.

³⁷ See A. Benjamin and Osborne, “Introduction,” xi.

³⁸ For the notions of tradition and destruction in Benjamin, see Düttmann (especially 54–55).

³⁹ Here Benjamin crosses paths with Martin Heidegger, who also envisions a “tradition that does not give itself up to the past, but thinks of the present” (Heidegger 1962: 8; trans. and qtd in Arendt 50).

Although this “barbar” was formally also part of the old, when wrenched from the context of “Barbarei” it is suddenly found in a new configuration of meaning. It is not part of an inescapable historical vortex anymore—the matrix of barbarism and civilization in Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History”—but comes to signify the challenge of the other. This “barbar” holds the promise for the disruption of the circle of history and the irruption of alterity. The precise content of this promise cannot be known in advance, as it is coded through an unintelligible (barbarian) language. The “barbar” anticipates a language yet to be articulated. The “little” that may survive the destructive force of the new positive barbarism so that one can “build up further” is not a concrete and coherent piece of tradition, but a small fragment of that tradition, nonsensical by itself, but placed in a new constellation and transformed. This fragment is here the “barbar”—the promise of a new language, that was already ingrained in the old, and that can steer, *but not determine*, the future.⁴⁰

At the same time, the suffix of Benjamin’s barbarism (“-tum”) challenges the deterministic course of “Barbarei.” By replacing the ending (“-ei”) of the old “Barbarei” and its history—a history for Benjamin concomitant with civilization—Benjamin gives his new, positive barbarism a different direction. The old barbarism is deprived of its teleology, as the ending of “Barbarei” changes into “-tum,” and from the little that remains (“barbar”) a new start can be envisioned. Could this be another way in which Benjamin’s “Barbarentum” tries to change the future and divert the unstoppable course of fascism—the total overcoming of Europe by negative barbarism—by performatively changing the end of this course in the word itself?

“Barbarentum” does not only try to change the course of fascism, but aspires to break the historical continuum of which fascism is only a small part. Based on Benjamin’s maxim in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” barbarism (what Benjamin calls “Barbarei”) is not the outside of civilization, but is intertwined with it. But if barbarism and civilization are two sides of the same coin, then barbarism is unable to disrupt the structures of civilization, because it operates within these structures. “Barbarentum,” on the other hand, does not only aspire to replace “Barbarei” with a positive concept and thereby reverse the hierarchy between barbarism and civilization. It also aspires to disrupt the closed circle of history within which this opposition thrives.

⁴⁰ In Benjamin’s “Letter to Gershom Scholem on Franz Kafka,” Benjamin writes about Kafka’s relation to tradition in a way that captures his own relation to tradition, not as a transmission of doctrines or clear-cut knowledge, but as a practice of listening and capturing “snatches of things”—indistinct elements that are reinvented in the present: “Kafka listened attentively to tradition—and he who strains to listen does not see. This listening requires great effort because only indistinct messages reach the listener. There is no doctrine to be learned, no knowledge to be preserved. What are caught flitting by are snatches of things not meant for any ear. This points to one of the rigorously negative aspects of Kafka’s work. (This negative side is doubtless far richer in potential than the positive)” (2006: 326).

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” written in 1940, Benjamin does not see a way out of this circle: the intertwining of civilization and barbarism locks history in a vicious circle. If we remain trapped within this circle, redemption is impossible. Perhaps, then, the exit he did not see in 1940 can be detected in his thinking seven years earlier, in “Experience and Poverty”: not “Barbarei,” but another kind of barbarism, where the name “Barbarentum,” could become the force “to blast open the continuum of history” (“Theses,” 1999b: 254). The aim of Benjamin’s language, Bracken writes, “would not be to ‘name’ the experience of the past but, by uttering a ‘word’ that interrupts the progress of history, to actualize the present” (341). That word is here “Barbarentum.”

“Barbarentum” is not civilization’s loyal opposite, but a rupture to the edifice sustained by “Kultur” and “Barbarei.” Viewed in this way, “Experience and Poverty” does not suggest a choice between a positive and a negative notion within an oppositional structure, but through “Barbarentum” it shakes the ground on which both the old barbarism and its traditionally positive opposites (civilization, culture, humanism) stand. “Barbarentum” breaks new ground through existing oppositions.

The Translation of Barbarism and the Barbarism of Translation

The conceptual and epistemological implications of “Barbarentum” are inextricable from this term’s performance in language, i.e. its linguistic deviation from the other two “barbarisms” in Benjamin and its function as a linguistic barbarism that challenges “Barbarei.” With this in mind, the question arises: What happens to the complex operations of “Barbarentum” in Benjamin’s text the moment it is translated with “barbarism” in English? Which of these operations survive—if any—and what other operations are unleashed through this translation?

If the meaning and philosophical content of “Barbarentum” is inscribed in its form, then “barbarism” is a mistranslation not just because it does not convey the unusual form of the German term, but because in failing to do so, it also transforms its illocutionary force.⁴¹ On the other hand, Benjamin’s own views on translation in “The Task of the Translator,” and especially his contention that translation should not strive for any likeness to the original, somewhat problematize the assessment of the translation of “Barbarentum” as “failed” due to its lack of correspondence to the original. “[N]o translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original,” Benjamin writes (1999b: 73). Translation is the original’s “afterlife,” and marks a process wherein the original undergoes transformation and renewal (72-73). Therefore, following Benjamin, translation should not strive for fidelity to the original.

⁴¹ The term “illocutionary force” belongs to Austin’s speech act theory and refers to the performative force of an utterance—the “performance of an act *in* saying something”—as opposed to the aspect of an utterance that conveys meaning (locutionary aspect) (Austin 94-108, particularly 99).

With Benjamin's views in mind, on what grounds can we evaluate the English translation of "Barbarentum"? In my view, Benjamin's suggested independence of translation from the original is not a free pass for any translation that deviates from the original to be automatically considered felicitous. Denouncing the translator's responsibility to reproduce the original accurately is not a way of suspending judgment on translation and securing its immunity from criticism. On the contrary: Benjamin's standpoint underscores the significance of translation as a work in its own right and not a byproduct of the original, and therefore makes translation as such visible. This visibility, however, makes it even more subject to criticism. Translation is not a transparency placed over the original, but a new text, and its unique performance should thus be the object of scrutiny.

In light of the above, I focus on the differences translation produces in the materiality of Benjamin's text. In this venture, Lawrence Venuti's views on the translation of philosophical texts are a valuable companion.⁴² Although I read "barbarism" as a mistranslation that neutralizes significant aspects of the text's critical performance, my intention is not to dismiss the translation as bad, wrong, or inaccurate. Instead, I want to draw attention to translation as an act: not to how (accurately or not) translation reproduces the original, but to what it *does*. Thus, I examine its performative effects and the difference of those effects—what Venuti calls the "remainder"—in relation to the source text.⁴³

"Reading for the remainder," Venuti argues, "means focusing on the linguistic and cultural differences" that the translation inscribes in the source text (1996b: 28). Venuti calls for a comparison between translation and original that seeks to reflect on "the deviations and excesses of the translation" (29). This kind of reading or comparing is more literary, because it is concerned not only with conceptual analysis, but also with the formal properties of language (29). Further, it relates the differences in translation to domestic traditions, institutional practices, hierarchies of styles, and discourses. The remainder in translation, then, is also telling for how concept-formation in philosophical discourse is determined by such linguistic or cultural conditions (29).

When translating "Barbarentum," the translator is confronted with a double foreignness. The German term is not just foreign to English, but it calls attention to itself due to its difference from the standard term "Barbarei." As the key term in Benjamin's essay, "Barbarentum" demands "a violent translation" that dislocates it rather than domesticates it in Anglo-American discourse.⁴⁴ Thus, a translation of "Barbarentum" with a term such as "barbarianhood" would have been more felicitous in preserving

⁴² I primarily draw from Venuti's views in "Translation, Philosophy, Materialism" (1996), but also in "Translation and the Formation of Cultural Identities" (1994) and *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995).

⁴³ Venuti borrows the notion of the "remainder" from Jean-Jacques Lecercle's *The Violence of Language* (1990), to refer to the irreducible and untranslatable difference left behind by the translation (1996a: 91).

⁴⁴ In *Telling Time*, Jacobs notes in relation to "The Task of the Translator" that the essay demands a "violent translation of every term promising the key to its definition" (1993: 129).

the foreignness of Benjamin's term in English and making the reader conscious of its difference from the standard term "barbarism."

The translation with the word "barbarism," on the other hand, assimilates the foreignness of this odd term into the disciplinary discourse of Anglo-American philosophy, so as to make it intelligible to domestic readership. The style that has dominated British philosophy since Bacon and Locke, says Venuti, prefers "current usage," smooth syntax, and "univocal meaning" (1996b: 29). Accordingly, English-language translating prefers "immediate intelligibility" and avoids any "linguistic or stylistic peculiarities that might pre-empt the illusion of transparency" (29). The translator, Rodney Livingstone, conforms to this tendency by choosing a familiar term. His choice makes recognizable what is foreign; Benjamin's text makes foreign what is recognizable.

Being alert to the remainder makes us more aware, and thus also more critical, of traditions and norms both in Anglo-American and in German contexts. It is remarkable that the word "barbarism" in English collapses all three German terms into one: "Barbarismus," "Barbarei" and "Barbarentum." The use of the single signifier "barbarism" in English, as opposed to its partitioning in German into three words, may carry cultural undertones. The use of a single term in English for these related but also divergent concepts may be seen as confusing, whereas the German distinction could be read as practical in evading ambiguity. Is this a case of English vagueness versus German precision and clarity? Using one term in English, one could claim, is a simplification of the nuances and distinctiveness of these concepts in German. Furthermore, since they are not distinguished in the English language, these concepts seem to have no *proper* conceptual place in English. Since there is just one "barbarism," challenges or resignifications can only come from within this concept, unless, of course, a term such as "barbarianhood" is coined.⁴⁵

The effects of a term are dependent on the context of its use. By using the same term for what (for Benjamin) are entirely different concepts, the translation steals away the novelty of Benjamin's "Barbarentum" by making it part of the same historical circle that ties civilization with barbarism (i.e., "Kultur" and "Barbarei"). As the distinction between the two terms is lost in translation, the conceptual potential of "Barbarentum"—its aspiration to interrupt the historical continuum—is weakened. This potential is intertwined with the word's form. In "Barbarentum" form and content are in tune, enhancing each other.

The way the translation assimilates Benjamin's writing into the Anglo-American academic tradition is also evident in the translation of the whole phrase in which the term "Barbarentum" is introduced in "Experience and Poverty." Benjamin writes: "Und damit eine Art von neuem Barbarentum." In the translation this becomes: "Hence a new kind of barbarism." There is a small but crucial difference in the way the words are arranged in

⁴⁵ A term such as "barbarianhood" would give "Barbarentum" a separate conceptual place in English, albeit an "improper" one, since "barbarianhood" is not an English word.

the translation: a literal translation of “eine Art von neuem Barbarentum” would give us “a *kind of* new barbarism” (or, even better, “barbarianhood”).⁴⁶ This formulation indicates that Benjamin’s new barbarism is an approximation: “some kind of barbarism,” but not quite.⁴⁷ This phrasing refuses to absolutize the term while infusing it with an ambiguous and enigmatic quality, which makes it difficult to pin down. This “kind of” new barbarism, as the phrase suggests, is a catachresis for a concept that cannot find precise and definitive expression in language. The choice for the uncommon “Barbarentum”—and its possible translation with “barbarianhood”—enhances this catachresis: “Barbarentum” as well as the phrasing that surrounds it indicate that Benjamin’s new concept resists being attached to an actual referent.

In the actual English translation—“a *new kind of* barbarism” (emphasis added)—the different position of the word “kind” has consequences for the meaning of the phrase. “Kind” here connotes “species,” “sort” or “category.” The phrase could thus be paraphrased as “a new *category* of barbarism,” instead of “some kind of” new barbarism. It is a formulation that reflects the categorizing impulse in the Anglo-American tradition, and the corresponding need to ground the term in a recognizable binary structure rather than let it slip away in vague formulations and approximations. In the source text, even if we read “Art” as “sort” or “category,” the implications would still be very different than those of the translation. A translation with “a *kind of* new barbarism” would not just suggest that there are more kinds of barbarism. Rather, it would leave open the possibility that there may be other kinds of *new* barbarism as well—and thus this particular new barbarian project might not be the only possible alternative. In this way, the risk that Benjamin’s “new barbarism” may develop into a new singular authoritative system is evaded. In a self-critical mode, Benjamin’s formulation acknowledges that other kinds of new barbarisms may come to contest the one proposed by Benjamin, and perhaps even replace it more successfully.

The English translation erases the distinctive features of Benjamin’s writing. “In criticism and in theater,” Betsy Flèche remarks, “Benjamin emphasizes the anxiety of performance: live criticism—‘quick,’ rather than taxidermic—(or even taxonomic) and dead” (103). What is produced through Benjamin’s text is “enacted and performed and never quite played out” (103). In the phrase “eine Art von neuem Barbarentum,” this inexhaustible performance of Benjamin’s text is based on a formulation that keeps the concept of “Barbarentum” purposefully indeterminate, foreign, playful, open to

⁴⁶ Many thanks to Mieke Bal for alerting me to this difference in translation.

⁴⁷ I cannot help but notice the similar formulation in the concluding verse of C. P. Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians,” which is the object of the following chapter. As the barbarians fail to show up while everyone is waiting for them, the poem ends with the words: “And now what’s going to happen to us without barbarians? / Those people were a *kind of* solution” (emphasis added). This indeterminate formulation—“a kind of”—is a crucial detail in the poem too, as I will argue in the next chapter.

contestations, and resistant to “taxonomic” (if not “taxidermic”) categorizations. The slight switch of word order in the translation has the opposite effect: it places the phrase on a procrustean bed and adjusts “Barbarentum” to a normative discourse, not only by translating it with the common term “barbarism,” but by accommodating it within an existing taxonomy and dichotomy. In translation, Mieke Bal argues, the philosophical text “must be made intelligible, yet remain, in its foreignness, informative as well as provocative, that is, performative” (2002: 94). Here, the translation steals away the performativity of Benjamin’s phrase.

In domesticating Benjamin’s text, the translator commits what Benjamin considers the “basic error of the translator,” namely preserving “the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue” (“The Task of the Translator,” 1999b: 81). By minimizing the provocative qualities in Benjamin’s phrasing, the translation—whether this was the translator’s intention or not—is more concerned with the domestic status quo than with the foreign text. According to Venuti, this translation would subscribe to an “ethics of sameness.” This is contrasted with an “ethics of difference,” which calls for maintaining the foreignness of the translated concept for domestic readerships, thereby informing and simultaneously provoking the readers (1996b: 30).

In light of Benjamin’s linguistic and stylistic strategies, translating his barbarian project is a challenging task. As a philosopher and a critic, Benjamin wants to disrupt the dominant language—not only historical discourse or the language of fascism, but also the language of the philosophical canon. His writing challenges the institutional limits of philosophy by mixing philosophical and literary modes in ways that make philosophy’s discursive borders visible and more vulnerable to critique. His “barbarian” style involves the use of minor linguistic forms traditionally excluded from major philosophical idioms. In so doing, Benjamin’s writing does not only give a new direction to saturated concepts, but also marks the limitations in the use of these concepts within the philosophical tradition. His stylistic innovation harbors a political project, which opens philosophical discourse to new kinds of thinking through new kinds of writing. This Benjamin, the innovator of language, is here lost in translation.

To extend my objective on another level, I wish to examine how the English translation transforms Benjamin’s project into a slightly different one. In line with Benjamin’s own ideas on translation and its separate life, it is worth probing the theoretical consequences of the translator’s chosen term. The theoretical implications I draw from the translation of “Barbarentum” with “barbarism” presuppose that the reader is aware of the original term “Barbarentum.”

In joining “Barbarei” and “Barbarentum” under the single name “barbarism,” the English translation performs a resignification that somewhat diverges from that in Benjamin’s essay. Since the two different “barbarisms” come to share the same signifier

and are thus *linguistically* indistinguishable in the translation, the concept of barbarism is subverted and transfigured solely from within—not by opting for a different word, but by adhering to the old standardized term and investing it with new meanings. Viewed in this way, the original and its translation enact a dilemma. On the one hand, there is Benjamin's choice: using a different word for a new project, while keeping a part of the old standard term ("barbar-"), so that the kinship of his new concept with the old is recognizable and his concept can still function as a reaction to it.⁴⁸ In other words, Benjamin's chosen term sustains a part of "Barbarei," but changes it to the extent that it is not the same anymore. On the other hand, we have the choice of Benjamin's translator: preserving the term "barbarism," and in so doing, trying to resignify it from within, so that it can challenge the long history of its negative use.⁴⁹

Consequently, the translation of "Barbarentum" with "barbarism" raises the following questions. What happens when an old, overdetermined term with violent connotations is put to use for new, constructive purposes? What are the possible benefits and traps of such a positive resignification? The question that interests me here is not what kind of project this translation would initiate in 1933. I follow the theoretical implications of the translator's choice from a present perspective and for the present.

The translation with "barbarism" places Benjamin's "Barbarentum" in the performative operations of the old barbarism. His new positive barbarism becomes inextricably tied to a long history of violence, exploitation or exclusion of civilization's others. While a positive resignification of "barbarism," as the one set in motion by Benjamin's translation, tries to redirect the term's negativity and violence into a series of affirmative and productive functions, such a move, as Judith Butler argues, inevitably also restages the performance of that violence (1997a: 14). The new operating field established for the term tries to break with the term's past uses, but is only legible in terms of that past (14). It therefore runs the risk of reiterating the abusive logic of this past.

⁴⁸ As I previously explained, the term "Barbarentum" itself, however unusual, also has its history of negative uses. Nevertheless, I contend that the term "Barbarei," given its common use in German and its use in Benjamin's writings as the proper opposite (and siamese twin) of civilization ("Kultur"), can be considered as the "old barbarism" *par excellence*, in the face of which Benjamin throws his new, reinvented "Barbarentum." I thus refer to "Barbarentum" as "new" in the context of Benjamin's writings.

⁴⁹ In response to Sartre's existentialist humanism and to Jean Beaufret's question "How can we restore meaning to the word 'humanism'," in his "Letter on 'Humanism'" Heidegger also questions the need to sustain -isms (like humanism), considering the obvious damage that these terms have caused:

Should we still keep the name "humanism" for a "humanism" that contradicts all previous humanism—although it in no way advocates the inhuman? And keep it just so that by sharing in the use of the name we might perhaps swim in the predominant currents, stifled in metaphysical subjectivism and submerged in oblivion of being? Or should thinking, by means of open resistance to "humanism," risk a shock that could for the first time cause perplexity concerning the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* and its basis? (1998: 263)

This "shock" will problematize the *humanitas* of human beings by decentering the human subject. Benjamin's "Barbarentum" and its translation with "barbarism" delineate a similar dilemma.

With this in mind, it is difficult to introduce “positive barbarism” or “good barbarians” in discourse without performing an act of violence against somebody else. What happens if privileged subjects take pride in being “good barbarians,” thereby (unwittingly) drawing attention away from the exclusionary violence of the term, as it continues to be applied to civilization’s others? How clear-cut is the distinction between good and bad barbarians, or between barbarians “by choice” and those tagged as “barbarians” by dominant groups? If Benjamin, for instance, finds examples of (good) barbarians among the Surrealists or in great creative spirits such as Descartes, Einstein, or Loos, then these barbarians need to be somehow distinguished from the exploited barbarian others implied in Benjamin’s famous statement in “Theses,” as well as from the barbarians involved in fascism and totalitarian regimes. Of course, the risk of reiterating the violence of barbarism is not exclusive to the English translation, but pertains to the German “Barbarentum” too. However, in the source text the attempt to make this distinction is already inscribed in the chosen term, which deviates from “Barbarei.”

While an act of resignification runs the risk of reproducing the injurious effects of a term, it also creates a future context for the term—a context not yet delineable and fully determinable (Butler 1997a: 14). A concept has an open temporality, which means that its performance in language could change and that it could eventually counter the violence normally accompanying the concept (12, 14-15). Therefore, the positive resignification of barbarism “from within,” which the translation of Benjamin’s term performs, may in fact be effective in countering the injurious workings of “barbarism” in language.

The dilemma that the original and its translation play out—whether to transform a saturated term or preserve it while investing it with a new meaning—is not easily resolved. Both options have consequences, many of which are not foreseeable. My purpose in articulating this dilemma in the context of Benjamin’s “Barbarentum” and its translation was not to make a choice, but to draw attention to the coexistence of two possibilities: two similar yet slightly different projects.

The juxtaposition of the original and the translation suggests that the (mis)translation of Benjamin’s term may become theoretically relevant rather than simply be reduced to a “mistake.” For a mistake is either dismissed as rubbish or seen as something to be rectified. The English translation of “Barbarentum” as “barbarism,” in contrast, may smooth out the term’s irregularity and make its performance less edgy, but it can also function as a productive accident: as I have shown, the “barbarism” of this translation could indicate another theoretical alternative through a slightly different strategy of resignification.

Looking into the difference the translation inscribes in the source text not only invites a rethinking of Benjamin’s text, but also makes translation as such visible. Foregrounding the performance of the translation of a philosophical text helps shatter the illusion of the transparency of philosophical language as universal. This, in its turn, can lead to a critical

rethinking of academic conventions and certainties.⁵⁰ In this sense, calling attention to the translation also becomes part of Benjamin's barbarian project.

Towards a Barbarian Methodology

Benjamin's writing, Betsy Flèche remarks, "forces his reader to confront incomprehension continually" (103). In my view, the challenge of a text like "Experience and Poverty" is not that it forestalls interpretation, but quite the contrary: it pluralizes interpretive possibilities to the extent that the critic often finds herself at a loss, not knowing which way to go. His text is not a dead-end, but a crossroads with many paths to take and no general pattern or key pointing us to the right direction, simply because there is not (just) one.

Benjamin's essay contains unorthodox conceptual pairings and collocations: constructive destruction, positive barbarism, cultural excess leading to poverty of experience, dehumanized names that rehumanize humans. Moreover, the central notions in the essay hold equivocal and contradictory connotations *within* themselves. Barbarism, experience, poverty, and destruction are all potentially positive as well as negative notions. Their indeterminacy does not make the essay's argumentative force weaker or less compelling: on the contrary, the essay makes its point *through* these inconsistencies, tensions, and obscurities. Concepts do not have a clear-cut and consistent meaning throughout the text (or throughout Benjamin's writings), because for Benjamin their meanings and functions are not predetermined and their fate has not been sealed.

For Benjamin, there are no good or bad concepts by definition. They are invented anew in the act of writing and with every critical reading. Their constant movement—a tantalizing oscillation between the positive and the negative, between their traditional and novel usages—makes it impossible for the critic to define them conclusively. Benjamin's notion of critique, as it emerges through the performance of concepts in this and the other essays examined in this chapter, is not a means of imposing judgment, but an act that participates in the creation and transformation of the concepts it addresses.⁵¹

In Benjamin's texts, as Carol Jacobs argues, a philosophical conception of language *presents itself* rather than is represented, described, and signified as a theoretical object:

It is an error to search Benjamin's work for stability in the terminology. Nothing works devoid of context, performance. These are texts that must always be read anew, less for the referents they do not seem to preserve than for their *Darstellung*: here lives,

⁵⁰ See Venuti's "Translation, Philosophy, Materialism" (24-25). Translation, Venuti argues, and particularly of conceptually dense philosophical discourse, "can never simply express ideas without simultaneously destabilizing and reconstituting them" (25). On the same issue, see also Venuti's book-length study *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995). On the relation of philosophy and translation, see Andrew Benjamin's study *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy* (1989), as well as George Steiner's *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975).

⁵¹ For this notion of critique in Benjamin, see Bracken 341.

works, theories, terms, are saved only like phenomena in ideas, only like stars in a constellation.⁵²

Benjamin is not interested in articulating an overall coherent philosophy. What matters is what a concept does (or does not do) in a particular context. His essay “produces interpretive crises” and “keeps its readers deliberately off-balance” (Flèche 105). What it says is often contradicted elsewhere. Benjamin’s “barbarian writing” subscribes to a “methodology of destabilization,” whereby the only consistent principle would be his motto: “always radical, never consistent.”⁵³

The loose ends produced by seeming inconsistencies invite the reader to focus on the particularities of every text, formulation, and word, instead of trying to “taxonomize” Benjamin’s writings. This is why the conclusions one can draw from his texts are not foreseeable. Perhaps it is part of Benjamin’s “barbarian methodology” to insert hidden details in his texts—such as the unexpected term “Barbarentum”—which activate the critical faculties of the reader or translator. “Experience and Poverty” incites us to read it against the grain: not in order to extract its overall meaning, but for the oddities and elements that do not quite fit. In this way, we are transformed from “proud owners” (of texts, words, concepts) into “practical critics” (“The Fireside Saga,” 2005a: 152).⁵⁴ The reader or translator of Benjamin’s text turns into a potential new barbarian, who starts with minute discrepancies and tries to make “a little go a long way”—perhaps a “way” very different from the one Benjamin envisioned.

Benjamin does not resolve questions by imposing clear-cut connections. He knew that his mode of writing was bound to be “the cause of certain obscurities.”⁵⁵ But this was part of his method. As he wrote in his opening paragraph in “The Task of the Translator,” “[n]o poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” (1999b: 70). His text is not supposed to serve the reader. Not being “intended for the reader” is not an elitist statement about the work of art (or of translation), but an essential feature of his “barbarian methodology.” His mode of writing produces questions instead of answers, transforms concepts, uses established terms in estranging combinations, and refuses to offer closure. As a result, the “barbarisms” his writing generates haunt the interpretations and translations of his texts and condemn them to incompleteness. In “Experience and Poverty,” the open relation between experience and poverty in the title is characteristic in this respect: instead of “Poverty of Experience” or some other causal or subordinating conjunction, Benjamin joins the two terms with

⁵² See Jacobs 1999: 7; also qtd in Szabari 613.

⁵³ The phrase “methodology of destabilization” comes from Flèche (107-08). Benjamin’s motto in German reads: “Immer radikal, niemals konsequent.” Benjamin wrote this in a letter to Gershom Scholem from 29 May 1926 to describe his attitude to all things that matter (W. Benjamin 1994: 300; 1978: 425).

⁵⁴ Benjamin makes this comment in relation to the new schools of architecture, which try to transform bourgeois homes and their inhabitants.

⁵⁵ From *Briefe I* (1978: 330); qtd in Arendt 52.

a simple “and.” In doing so, the title sets up a dialectical relation between the two concepts instead of imposing a predetermined connection of dependency. “Poverty” and “experience” stand independently in an unsettled relation, which the reader is invited to (re)write after reading the essay.

A similar openness permeates “Barbarentum.” The concept, as Benjamin’s text constructs it, disavows an either/or structure, as it transforms an old term into a vehicle for the old and the new, the positive and the negative, the proper and the erratic. Benjamin’s text survives its own contradictions because it does not present them as either/or choices or absolute oppositions, but as coexisting possibilities. By letting extremes infiltrate each another, his text becomes a “medium for antagonisms between which there could be neither choice nor mediation” (Wohlfarth 157).

If for Benjamin the original does not dictate the translation’s afterlife, this also applies to the fate of his own text. The obscurities, ambivalent passages, and fragmentary sentences make his writing susceptible to creative interpretations but also to misreadings and mistranslations. But this is also the instructive aspect of his writing: the point of his texts does not only lie in what they say, but also in how they say it. In the words of Eduardo Cadava, “the movement of his language inscribes the lessons he wishes us to learn” (124).

Benjamin’s barbarian methodology involves the partial renunciation of control over his text and its subjection to misunderstandings and mistranslations. This, too, is a quality of Benjamin’s “destructive character”:

The destructive character has no interest in being understood. Attempts in this direction he regards as superficial. Being misunderstood cannot harm him. On the contrary, he provokes it, just as oracles, those destructive institutions of the state, provoked it. (W. Benjamin 2005b: 542)

The speech of the destructive character instigates misunderstanding and incomprehension, just like the speech of the oracle is replete with enigmatic utterances, polemic statements, and obscure warnings. The oracle, which is here likened to the destructive character, is supposed to predict, and thus also determine, the future by either enabling or preventing certain developments. However, the oracle in Greek antiquity, with her equivocal, confusing, and sometimes almost unintelligible speech, expresses the future in the alien, barbarian language of that future. Paradoxically, the oracle’s speech, notoriously open to interpretation, signifies the unpredictability and openness of the future as it tries to predict and direct it. The oracle does not seal the future; she speaks in an elusive, barbarian language, because the future and its language are not yet written.⁵⁶ The language of

⁵⁶ There are many—mythical or historical—narratives from Greek antiquity, in which the oracle’s predictions are not fulfilled. These “misfires” are ascribed to a “wrong” interpretation of the oracle’s words by those seeking consultation. The fact is, however, that the oracle’s advice can be interpreted in contradictory ways, because it usually stays open.

the destructive character, as well as of Benjamin's writings, has comparable qualities: it is enigmatic, inconclusive, and open.⁵⁷

By provoking misunderstanding, Benjamin in fact communicates power to the translator or reader of his text, which in their turn can use it, abuse it, redirect it, dismiss it, get lost in it, or hang on to a detail and build something new that makes sense in another era and context. Causing misunderstanding can be a radical form of (self-)critique, because it suggests a willingness to subject your own writing to good or bad translations, readings and recontextualizations. It entails taking distance from your own text and ingraining a self-critical attitude in it. Perhaps this self-critical stance is suggested in the enigmatic phrase that concludes the second-to-last paragraph of "Experience and Poverty":

And now we need to step back and keep our distance. (2005b: 735)

This sentence deserves a closer look. The paragraph starts with the argument that poverty of experience does not lead to a yearning for new experience, but to utter exhaustion. Having devoured everything, people "have had such a surfeit that it has exhausted them." In the rest of the paragraph, Benjamin talks about sleep and dreams—the logical consequence of this exhaustion—from a rather unexpected angle:

Tiredness is followed by sleep, and then it is not uncommon for a dream to make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day—a dream that shows us in its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality. The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for contemporary man. His life is full of miracles—miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them. For the most extraordinary thing about them is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to have been improvised out of the body of Mickey Mouse, out of his supporters and persecutors, and out of the most ordinary pieces of furniture, as well as from trees, clouds, and the sea. Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged. And to people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an endless horizon, it must come as a tremendous relief to find a way of life in which everything is solved in the simplest and most comfortable way, in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on the tree becomes round as quickly as a hot-air balloon. *And now we need to step back and keep our distance.* (734-735, emphasis added)

⁵⁷ "The Destructive Character" is not a "well-developed characterization," but a text full of fragmentary and provocative formulations. The style of writing causes misunderstandings "that it neither seeks nor avoids." Therefore, the text itself proceeds exactly in the same manner as the destructive character; it does not just describe this character, but performs it by employing a "destructive style" (Wohlfarth 178).

Here, just as with other central concepts in this essay, Benjamin might be talking back to the notion of “distance” in the fascist context. Fascism, as I previously discussed, promotes an aestheticization of politics and war. For Benjamin, this can lead to an extreme self-alienation of mankind, which “can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order”—from a distance (“Work of Art,” 1999b: 235). This is not the kind of distance that Benjamin addresses in “Experience and Poverty.” But what kind of distance does he call for and what does Mickey Mouse have to do with it?

Benjamin sees the necessity for a distance from modern reality, since total immersion in it leads to exhaustion. Dreaming is a means of taking distance from (and escaping) reality. Mickey Mouse represents a utopian dream, in which nature and technology merge harmoniously and everything is effortlessly realized without the complications of modern life and without any of the energy “lacking in reality” (“Experience and Poverty,” 2005b: 734).

Paradoxically, in Mickey Mouse films the image of reality as freed from technology is generated by a profound intrusion of technology. In “The Work of Art” Benjamin observes that in film-making technology penetrates reality so deeply, that the produced illusion of pure reality, liberated from equipment (as in Mickey Mouse), is technologically constructed. The “thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment,” as it happens in film, offers “an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment” (1999b: 227). “The equipment-free aspect of reality here,” Benjamin writes, “has become the height of artifice” (226).

As Benjamin notes in a very short unpublished essay from 1931 called “Mickey Mouse,” the first cartoon films “disavow experience more radically than ever before. In such a world, it is not worthwhile to have experiences” (2005b: 545). If people, as Benjamin claims in “Experience and Poverty,” “long to free themselves from experience” and to find a world in which they can make “pure and decided use of their poverty” (inner and outer), then Mickey Mouse seems to offer precisely such a world.

This world of dream sounds seductively perfect—perhaps too perfect. Benjamin does not like perfect solutions. Thus, in my view, his call for taking distance at the end of the paragraph on Mickey Mouse is not an invitation for people to lose themselves in this dream and grow alienated from reality. Film in general, and particularly the example of Mickey Mouse, does not only lead to distancing from the complexity of modern life, but it simultaneously signifies a complete lack of distance, which is typical for new artistic media: while the painter always keeps a “natural distance from reality,” in film “the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web” (“Work of Art,” 1999b: 227). Although Benjamin’s call for distance in “Experience and Poverty” is certainly not a plea for going back to more traditional forms of art, such as painting, I also do not read it as a wish to get absorbed in Mickey Mouse’s dream. Mickey Mouse films are dream and reality together, a dream and a nightmare perhaps, containing both the barbarian face of modernity and its overcoming in a utopian world. This is perhaps why for Benjamin Mickey Mouse offers

a world in which “mankind makes preparations to survive civilization” (“Mickey Mouse,” 2005b: 545).

The world of Mickey Mouse reveals the magic of technology by concealing its mechanisms. The danger here lies in making the system of technology imperceptible. By making their means of production invisible, Mickey Mouse films may grant technology absolute, magical power, the power of God: invisible but omnipresent and omnipotent. This power might be abused in totalitarian ideologies—the fascist aestheticization of politics illustrates how the “apotheosis” of machines and mechanical warfare can go wrong. At the same time, as I have laid out in this chapter, technology and new media hold a revolutionary potential and are capable of opening up new realms of experience.

Benjamin, I contend, wants us to take a critical distance, in order to make technology visible and thereby deprive it of its potential omnipotence. The distance he asks for would allow us to see the double, complex nature of Mickey Mouse—and through Mickey Mouse, the double potential of technology or modernity as both a constant danger and hope for newness. The *locus* from which people can take this distance, I argue, is neither the dream nor reality, but in-between. What is crucial is the moment of transition from dream to reality and the other way around: the state of just waking up or falling asleep, which is where dreams and reality become intertwined. Perhaps it is here, in this twilight between sleep and wakefulness, where this desired distance is materialized. This in-between state presupposes a distance from both dream and reality—a distance, however, that is only partial, and therefore enables us to be self-critical and engaged at the same time. Keeping such a critical distance might be the only way to avoid exhaustion by the sensory overload of modernity without deifying the wonders of technology as natural miracles. The products of technology need to be seen as artificial constructions, which can be changed, transformed, translated, subverted, criticized.

Being in-between dream and wakefulness allows us not to get too close to each state, but close enough to achieve an openness to insight that would be impossible when one is fully immersed in a certain state. Perhaps it takes just such a distance for the reader to notice the crucial details in Benjamin’s text, such as the small barbarism in “Barbarentum.” This is also the distance Benjamin takes from his own text, as he releases it to the mercy of his readers and translators. This critical distance captures a crucial difference between the barbarism of totalitarian or authoritative regimes, and Benjamin’s new, positive barbarism: the willingness not only to subvert the enemy’s language, the language of others, but also your own, by opening it up to misreadings, mistakes, and constant questioning.

Benjamin opens his text to such exposures. As a result, his essay envisions a world able to question itself and be open to its own uncertainty. The lesson his essay teaches the reader does not lie in the continuing validity of its arguments. To argue that Benjamin’s text survives time and continues to be relevant today might or might not be true, but is

perhaps beside the point. To assume the text's timelessness and continued relevance—as it very often happens in studies of Benjamin—could even do violence to the text's instructive power, especially when it leads to the fetishization of Benjamin's oeuvre by contemporary criticism. This fetishization of Benjamin and his work is the kind of objectification his text resists. It is precisely this fixity that ensures the perpetuation of the traditional, negative barbarism within culture. Benjamin's text is marked by the tireless intention to disrupt the field of the same. But whether this disruption actually takes place depends not on a permanent quality in his text, but on its performance. What a certain term, sentence, or essay is able to do in a certain historical moment, it might fail to do in another, future moment. What "Experience and Poverty" can do in 1933 may not be possible in 2010, while in 2010 a new potential in the text might be activated. This is perhaps the quintessence of his barbarian methodology and the legacy of his text, as it opens itself to misunderstandings, and thus also to its own self-destruction.

