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The Ruin

When, with the *Trauerspiel*, history wanders onto the scene, it does so as script. "History" stands written on nature's countenance in the sign-script of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of natural history, which is brought onstage in the *Trauerspiel*, is actually present as ruin. In the ruin, history has merged sensuously with the setting. And so configured, history finds expression not as a process of eternal life, but rather as one of unstoppable decline. Allegory thereby proclaims itself beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things. Thus the Baroque cult of the ruin. Borinski, less exhaustive in his argument than accurate in his report on factual matters, knows of this cult.¹ "The broken pediment, the ruined columns should bear witness to the miraculous fact that the holy edifice has withstood even the most elemental forces of destruction—lightning and earthquake. The artificially ruined appears, then, as the last inheritance of an antiquity still visible in the modern world only in its material form, as a picturesque field of rubble."² A footnote adds: "The rise of this tendency can be traced to the ingenious practice of Renaissance artists who displace the birth and adoration of Christ from the medieval stable into the ruins of an antique temple. In a work by Domenico Ghirlandaio (Florence, Accademia), the ruins still consisted of flawlessly preserved showpieces; in the sculptural, colorful representations of the Nativity, the ruins become an end in themselves as picturesque settings for transient splendor."³ The most contemporary feeling for style asserts itself here far more powerfully than the reminiscences of a false antiquity [*antikischen Reminiszenzen*]. What lies shattered amid the rubble, the highly sig-

nificant fragment, the scrap: this is the noblest material of Baroque creation. For it is a common feature of Baroque literature to heap up fragments—incessantly and without any strict idea of a goal—and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to view stereotypes as instances of intensification. Baroque writers must have regarded the work of art as a miracle in just this sense. And if the artwork, on the other hand, beckoned to them as the calculable result of this heaping up, these two conceptions are no less commensurable than is that of the longed-for, miraculous work with the subtlest theoretical recipes in the mind of an alchemist. The experimentation of the Baroque poets resembles the practices of the adepts. What antiquity left behind is, for them, piece for piece, the elements from which the new whole is to be blended. No—is to be constructed. For the perfected vision of this new thing was: ruin. The bombastic mastering of antique elements in an edifice that, without uniting them into a whole, would still, in destroying them, prove superior to the harmonies of antiquity: this is the purpose of the technique that applies itself separately, and ostentatiously, to *realia*, rhetorical flowerings, and rules. Literature should be called *ars inveniendi*.⁴ The notion of the man of genius, the master of *ars inveniendi*, is that of a man who could operate in sovereign fashion with existing models. "Imagination," what the moderns call creative capacity, was unknown as the measure of a hierarchy of mental traits. "The noblest reason that no one in German poetry has yet been able to approach our Opitz, let alone surpass him (which will not occur in the future either), is that, besides the remarkable agility of the excellent nature that inhabits him, he is as well read in the Latin and Greek texts as he is proficient in formulating and inventing."⁵ The German language, however, as the grammarians of the age saw it, is in this sense only another "nature" alongside that of the ancient models. Hankamer explains their view in the following way: "Linguistic nature, like material nature, already contains every secret." The writer "brings no power to it, creates no new truth out of the self-creating soul that seeks expression."⁶ The writer was not supposed to conceal his combinatory practice, since the center of all intended effects was not the mere whole but rather the work's manifest constructedness. Thus the ostentation of the craftsmanship that, especially in Calderón, shows through like the masonry wall on a building whose plaster has begun to crumble.⁷ Nature has thus remained, one might say, the great teacher for the writers of this period. Yet nature appears to them not in the bud and blossom but in the overripeness and decay of its creations. Nature looms before them as eternal transience, in which the saturnine gaze of those

generations was the only one that recognized history. Dwelling in their monuments (the ruins), as Agrippa von Nettesheim put it, are the saturnaline beasts.⁸ In decay, solely and alone in decay, historical occurrence shrivels up and disappears into the setting. The quintessence of those decaying things is the extreme opposite of the idea of a transfigured nature as conceived by the early Renaissance. Burdach has shown that the latter idea of nature is "in no way related to ours." "For a long time it remained dependent on the linguistic usage and thought of the Middle Ages, even if the valorization of the term 'nature' and the idea of nature visibly improve. The theory of art of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, in any case, understands the imitation of nature as the imitation of a nature formed by God."⁹ This nature, though, which bears the imprint of the course of history, is fallen nature. The Baroque preference for apotheosis runs counter to that period's characteristic mode of observing things. With the authority of their allegorical significance, things bear the seal of the all-too-earthly. Never do they transfigure themselves from within. Thus their illumination by the limelight of apotheosis. There has hardly ever been a literature whose virtuosic illusionism more thoroughly expunged from its works that transfiguring lustrous appearance [*Schein*] with which people had once sought, rightly, to define the essence of artistry. The lusterlessness of Baroque lyric can be seen as one of its primary characteristics. The drama is no different. "Thus, one must press forward through death into that life / That turns Egypt's night into Goshen's day for us / And grants us the pearl-studded robe of eternity!"¹⁰ This is how Hallmann paints eternal life from the standpoint of the prop room. A stubborn clinging to props thwarted the portrayal of love. Unworldly lasciviousness, lost in its own fantasy, holds sway. "A lovely woman, adorned with a thousand ornaments, is an inexhaustible table that satisfies the many; / An eternal spring that always has water / indeed the sweet milk of life; As if lithe sugar / ran in a hundred canes. It is the teaching of the fiend, / the manner of nearsighted [*schelen*] envy, to deny to others / the food that comforts—and that is not consumed."¹¹ Any sufficient veiling of content is missing in the typical works of the Baroque. Their aspirations, even in the lesser literary forms, are so lofty as to be oppressive. And gravitation toward the small and the secret is likewise wholly absent. Attempts to replace the small and the secret with the riddling and the hidden prove to be as extravagant as they are vain. In the true work of art, delight knows how to make itself fleeting, how to live in the moment, disappear, become new. The Baroque work of art wants nothing more than to endure, and so clings with all its organs to the eter-

nal. This alone makes it possible to understand how, and with what liberating sweetness, the first dalliances of the new century seduced the reader, and how, for the Rococo period, chinoiserie became the counter-image to hieratic Byzantinism. If the Baroque critic speaks of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total work of art] as the summit of the period's aesthetic hierarchy and as the ideal of *Trauerspiel* itself,¹² he thereby reinforces in a new way this spirit of heaviness. As an accomplished allegorist, Harsdörffer was, among many theorists, the most thorough advocate for the interweaving of all the arts.¹³ For it is precisely this that the ascendancy of allegorical contemplation dictates. Winckelmann makes the connection only too clear when, with polemical exaggeration, he remarks: "Vain is . . . the hope of those who believe that allegory might be taken so far as to enable one to paint even an ode."¹⁴ Something even stranger must be added. How do the literary works of the century introduce themselves? Dedications, forewords and afterwords (by the writer, as well as by others), testimonials, and commendations of the great masters are the rule. Like heavy, ornate framework, these short texts inevitably surround the contents of the larger volumes and the editions of collected works. For the gaze that took satisfaction in the object itself was a rarity. Amid the welter of daily affairs, people thought to acquire works of art; and their engagement with them was, far less than in later periods, a private matter free of calculation. Reading was obligatory and formative [*bildend*].¹⁵ The range of the works, their intentional bulkiness and lack of mystery, should be understood as the correlative of such an attitude among the public. These works seemed destined less to be disseminated by growing over time than to fill their place in the here-and-now. And in many respects they forfeited their reward. But just for this reason, criticism, with rare clarity, lies unfolded in their continued duration. From the very beginning, they aimed for that critical decomposition which the passage of time inflicted on them. Beauty has, for the uninitiated, nothing unique about it; and for such people, the German *Trauerspiel* is less accessible than almost anything else. Its lustrous semblance has died because of its extreme coarseness. What endures is the odd detail of allegorical reference—an object of knowledge nesting in the thought-out constructions of rubble. Criticism is the mortification of works. The essence of these works accommodates this more readily than does any other form of production. Mortification of works: not therefore—as the Romantics have it—the awakening of consciousness in living works,¹⁶ but the ensettlement of knowledge in those that have died away. Beauty that endures is an object of knowledge. And though it is

questionable whether the beauty that endures still deserves the name, it is nevertheless certain that nothing is beautiful unless there is something worthy of knowledge in its interior. Philosophy must not attempt to deny that it reawakens the beautiful in works. "Science cannot lead to the naive enjoyment of art, any more than geologists and botanists can awaken a feeling for the beauty of landscape":¹⁷ this assertion is as unconvincing as the analogy that aims to support it is misguided. The geologist and the botanist are perfectly capable of doing just this. Without at least an intuitive grasp of the life of the detail, as embedded in a structure, all devotion to the beautiful is nothing more than empty dreaming. In the last analysis, structure and detail are always historically charged. The object of philosophical criticism is to show that the function of artistic form is precisely this: to make historical material content [*Sachgehalte*], the basis of every significant work of art, into philosophical truth content [*Wahrheitsgehalten*].¹⁸ This restructuring of material content into truth content makes the weakening of effect, whereby the attractiveness of earlier charms diminishes decade by decade, into the basis for a rebirth in which all ephemeral beauty completely falls away and the work asserts itself as a ruin. In the allegorical constructions of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, these ruined forms of the redeemed work of art have always stood out clearly.

Written in 1925; published in 1928. *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 353–358. Excerpted from *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, section 3, "Allegory and Trauerspiel." Translated by Michael W. Jennings. A previous translation by John Osborne (London, 1977) was consulted.

Notes

1. Karl Borinski (1861–1922) was a German literary scholar who wrote on the reception and adaptation of classical art theory in German literature.
2. Borinski, *Die Antike*, I, pp. 193–194. [Benjamin's note. See Karl Borinski, *Die Antike in Poetik und Kunsttheorie von Ausgang des klassischen Altertums bis auf Goethe und Wilhelm von Humboldt*, vol. 1: *Mittelalter, Renaissance, Barock* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1914).—*Trans.*]
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 305–306n. [Benjamin's note]
4. *Ars inveniendi* is Latin for "art of inventing."
5. August Buchner, *Wegweiser zur deutschen Tichtkunst* [Guide to German Literature] (Jena, n.d. [1663]), pp. 80ff.; quoted from Borchardt, *Augustus Buchner*, p. 81. [Benjamin's note. See Hans Heinrich Borchardt, *Augustus Buchner und seine Bedeutung für die Literatur des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Beck, 1919). The Silesian poet and civil servant Martin Opitz (1597–1639) wrote the *Buch von der deutschen Poeterey* (Book of German

- Poesie), one of the first poetological treatises on vernacular literature. He was a member of the Fruchtbringende Gesellschaft (Fruitbearing Society), a group of nobles and authors dedicated to developing and promoting German as a legitimate intellectual and artistic language alongside Latin and Greek.—*Trans.*]
6. Paul Hankamer, *Die Sprache: Ihr Begriff und ihre Deutung im sechzehnten und siebzehnten Jahrhundert—Ein Beitrag zur Frage der literarhistorischen Gliederung des Zeitraums* [Language: Concept and Interpretation in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries—A Contribution to the Question of the Literary-Historical Articulation of the Period] (Bonn, 1927), p. 135. [Benjamin's note]
 7. The Spanish dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600–1681) is a major figure in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book. See also "Calderón's *El Mayor Monstruo*, *Los Celos*, and Hebbel's *Herodes und Mariamne*" (1923), in Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 363–386.
 8. The German humanist, jurist, and physician Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535) wrote many treatises on the Kabbalah, magic, and the occult.
 9. Burdach, *Reformation*, p. 178. [Benjamin's note. See Konrad Burdach, *Reformation, Renaissance, Humanismus: Zwei Abhandlungen über die Grundlage moderner Bildung und Sprachkunst* (Reformation, Renaissance, Humanism: Two Essays on the Foundations of Modern Education and the Verbal Arts) (Berlin: Paetel, 1918).—*Trans.*]
 10. Hallmann, "Mariamne," in *Trauer-, Freuden- und Schäferspiele* [Plays of Mourning and of Joy, and Pastorals], p. 90. [Benjamin's note. Benjamin cites the collection of Johann Christian Hallmann's *Trauerspiele* and other plays published in Breslau in 1684. Hallmann (ca. 1640–ca. 1716), a Silesian dramatist of the Baroque period, went to the same *Gymnasium* (classical secondary school) in Breslau that Martin Opitz and Daniel Caspar von Lohenstein attended.—*Trans.*]
 11. Lohenstein, *Agrippina*, pp. 33–34 (II, 380ff.). [Benjamin's note. Benjamin cites the 1724 Leipzig edition of *Agrippina*, a *Trauerspiel* by Daniel Caspar von Lohenstein (1635–1683), a Silesian jurist, diplomat, and dramatist.—*Trans.*]
 12. Cf. Koltitz, *Hallmanns Dramen*, pp. 166–167. [Benjamin's note. See Kurt Koltitz, *Johann Christian Hallmanns Dramen: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen Dramas in der Barockzeit* (Berlin: Mayer & Müller, 1911).—*Trans.*]
 13. Benjamin refers to the Nuremberg poet Georg Philipp Harsdörffer (1607–1658), also a member of the Fruchtbringende Gesellschaft.
 14. Winckelmann, *Versuch einer Allegorie*, p. 19. [Benjamin's note. Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Versuch einer Allegorie besonders für die Kunst*

- (Attempt at an Allegory Especially for Art) was first published in 1766; Benjamin cites an edition published in Leipzig in 1866. It is available in English in Winckelmann, *Writings on Art*, ed. David Irwin (London: Phaidon, 1972). The German archaeologist and art historian scholar Winckelmann (1717–1768) exerted great influence on the fields of archaeology and art history through his writings, which presented an idealized vision of classical antiquity in his influential writings.—*Trans.*]
15. The word *Bildung* means not merely “education,” but the active and ongoing formation of the self.
 16. Cf. Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik*, pp. 53ff. [Benjamin’s note. In English: “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism” (1920), in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, pp. 116–200.—*Trans.*]
 17. Petersen, “Aufbau,” p. 12. [Benjamin’s note. See J. Petersen, “Der Aufbau der Literaturgeschichte,” *Germanisch-romanische Monatschrift*, 6 (1914): 12.—*Trans.*]
 18. On the notion of material content and truth content, see “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” (1924–1925), in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, especially pp. 297–298.

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The Dismemberment of Language

The language-theoretical principles and the practices of these dramatists combine to bring out a fundamental motif of the allegorical view in a thoroughly surprising place. In the anagrams, the onomatopoetic turns of phrase, and many other kinds of linguistic virtuosity [of the Baroque], word, syllable, and sound are emancipated from all traditional associations of meaning and flaunt themselves as a thing that can be exploited allegorically. The language of the Baroque is constantly convulsed by rebellions among its elements. And the following passage from Calderón’s Herod drama is superior to related works—in particular, to those of Gryphius—only by virtue of its vividness of emphasis [*Anschaulichkeit*], which it owes to its artistry. Through a coincidence, Mariamne, Herod’s wife, comes across scraps of a letter in which her husband commands that, in the event of his own death, she be put to death in order to preserve his supposedly endangered honor. She picks up these scraps from the floor and, in highly evocative lines, gives an account of their contents.

What do these bits of paper say?
 “Death” is the very first word
 That I find; here is “honor,”
 And there I read “Mariamne.”
 What is this? Heavens, save me!
 For much is said in three words,
 “Mariamne,” “death,” and “honor.”
 Here is “in silence,” here
 “Dignity,” here “commands,” and here “ambition”;
 And here it continues “if I die . . .”