Prophecy, Written Language, and the Mimetic Faculty: Benjamin’s Linguistic Mysticism as Cure of the “Language Myth”

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“There is no such thing as language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed.” – Donald Davidson, *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs* (1986)

Religious language is integrated with ordinary language, the language of life, experience, politics, and emotion. To the extent that both cognitive and historical approaches to religion rely on Kantian metaphysics, non-dual theories of language – whether Spinoza’s, Benjamin’s, or Buddhism’s – are helpful to relieve us of the silly idea that we can use apolitical scientific language to step outside the ordinary political language of the everyday just far enough to investigate the religious stuff that is really out there. But like modern “materialists”, Benjamin was confronted with the resistances that thought and consciousness offer to a purely materialist account of things. Language, as the primary mode of representation, will always be a problem for the materialist. To address this problem, Benjamin took recourse in both theology and natural history.

This paper asks whether Benjamin’s form of materialism is helpful as a response to the “new materialism” in the study of religion. I focus specifically on Benjamin’s theory of language through a reading of his essay “On language itself and on human language” written in 1916, when he was a 24-year-old university student in the city of Munich, and translated by Edmund Jephcott into English in 1978. I argue that his like Spinoza, Benjamin’s materialism was an ontological monism coupled with a methodological or conceptual dualism: that is, mind and body “are distinct simply as ways of seeing, not as objects.” (I, 393) Due to this materialist stance, Benjamin’s approach to language was one of the first anti-representation theories of language. But like modern “materialists”, Benjamin was confronted with the resistances that thought and consciousness offer to a purely materialist account of things. Language, as the primary mode of representation, will always be a problem for the materialist. To address this problem, Benjamin took recourse in both theology and natural history.

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1 I would like to thank Richard Hecht for inviting me to join his Benjamin seminar in the fall of 1999, and from which this essay derives. Many of the insights within are indebted to that conversation.
3 From Benjamin’s “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem.” In what follows references to some of Benjamin’s works will be parenthetical, with a Roman numeral indicating the volume from Benjamin’s selected writings in English: Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (eds.) *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927-1934*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).
5 The title of the essay is often translated: “On Language as such and the Language of Man”. In my opinion the phrase “language of man” is redundant since there are no nonhuman languages (in standard parlance). Of course this depends on how we define language. “Language itself” might be better translated “communication system,” “cognitive process,” or even “natural computation”.
6 The source text for the translation is the collected works of Benjamin in German: *Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften*, seven volumes (Frankfurt:
reflections on language and religion provide valuable insight into the study of Biblical prophecy, a moment perhaps when the “bourgeois conception of language” first developed. With some help from contemporary scholars of language to get a better grasp of Benjamin’s ideas, I suggest that the invention of writing is a watershed in the natural history of the human species, precipitating both the “Fall” and new vistas for cognition.

**Prophecy: from Divinatory to Textual Mimetics**

We start with a rather simple idea recently explored in a brief passage by Pascal Boyer in *Religion Explained*. Boyer points to the shift that must have taken place when religious guilds first took over control of religious specialties from the shaman or diviner. He notes that written language would have a major role in this process. Boyer’s brief comments about literate religion are helpful, though superficial. He thinks literacy is an essential part of “organized” religion and “theology”, though he thinks the origin of “religious guilds” is a result of both literacy and complex polities (i.e., cities), which are “naturally intertwined.” He thinks literate guilds competed with localized “illiterate” religions. Boyer argues further that literate religious guilds “offer account of gods and spirits that is generally integrated (most elements hand together and cross reference one another), apparently deductive (you can infer the

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Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1989). This essay was not published in his lifetime, but was “shared among a narrow circle of friends and partners in intellectual exchange.” (489, I)

7 Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York, Basic Books, 2001, 270ff. “There were written religious texts, ritual prescriptions, lists and tables of moral prescriptions and prohibitions because religious specialists [healers, shamans, holy men] were transformed into an organized social group, akin to a corporation or guild… Such groups often try to control the market for their services.” (275) Boyer goes on to point out that the market for religious knowledge is inherently more unstable than that of craftsmen or the like because “religious specialists supply something… that could easily be provided by outsiders.” (276) One solution to this precariousness is “to turn the guild’s ministration into a brand…” (277)
word προφήτης [prophetes], an interpreter, proclaimer, or spokesperson, which Jewish translators of the Septuagint used in place of the Hebrew word nābî’, or נביא.

The Hebrew word nābî’ is of debated derivation, and is used inconsistently within the text, for “the diverse activity and the historical development of Israelite prophecy do not yield a single prophetic essence.”

There are 5-10 distinctive overlapping uses of the term nābî’ or “prophet” in the Hebrew Bible. They include champion, rebel rouser, ecstatic, king’s advisor, king’s anointer, cult figure, medium, intercessor, leader of bands, social critic, poet, and historian.

This floating characteristic of linguistic signs is a notorious result of written

8 “The Greek προφήτης was originally the spokesman or interpreter of a divinity, e.g. of Zeus, Dionysus, Apollo, or the deliverer or interpreter of an oracle, corresponding generally to the Latin vates. By the LXX it was adopted to render the Heb. nābî’, in the O.Test. applied indiscriminately to the prophets of Jehovah, of Baal and other heathen deities, and even to ‘false prophets’, reputed or pretended soothsayers. In the N.T. it is used in the same senses as in the LXX, but mainly applied to the Hebrew prophets of Jehovah, also to John the Baptist, as well as to certain persons in the Early Church, who were recognized as possessing more or less of the character of the old Hebrew prophets, or as inspired to utter special revelations and predictions; also applied historically to Balaam, and by St. Paul, in the old Greek sense, to Epimenides the Cretan, while ‘false prophets’ are frequently mentioned. The Greek word was adopted in L. as prophetēa chiefly in post-classical times, and largely under Christian influences; and this is the regular rendering in the Itala, Vulgate, and Christian Fathers. From Ecclesiastical Latin it has passed down into the Romanic and Teutonic languages. In English the earliest uses are derived from the Scriptures; but the word is currently used in all the ancient senses and in modern ones derived from them.” (Oxford English Dictionary, Online)

9 The internal structure of the word bears the following meaning: πρό [pro] – forth, before, for + φητης [phetes] – speaker, from φάναι [phanai] – to speak.


12 In non-literate cultures, there may be various meanings of words one could isolate, but they are only reified as such when linguists come in to study them, or when the words are subject to the technological focus of ritual and religion. The English word prophet is derived, through Latin, from a Greek word used to translate a Hebrew term. There is a sense in which this baggage of derivation is carried with the word in all its uses.

In the only detailed etymology of the term Daniel Fleming points out that earlier scholars suggested that the Hebrew word nābî’ is a passive noun form of the Semitic root nb meaning “to call, invoke, or announce”. This was based on a comparison with the Akkadian verb nabû, meaning “to invoke”. In this vein, the term nābî’ was often translated as “spokesman”, one called by God. However, given recent evidence from Mari, Fleming argues that the Syrian nābû offers a closer comparison. Nâbû is an active participle from the verb nabû, meaning “to name”. He argues that the Hebrew word originated in this West Semitic title. The nābî’ would then be the name, or caller, for “which may then indicate ‘calling’ on the name of a god, naming to kingship or rule, or even naming a price.”

13 Jacques Derrida thought about the notion of translation quite explicitly in relation to both prophecy and Benjamin in his essay “Des Tours de Babel” (The Tower of Babel), which explores the indeterminacy of translation noted above; the idea that a translation is always over-determined and an act of something new. Derrida pursues these issues through a reading of the Biblical story of Babel (Genesis 11), in which he sees Yahweh punishing humanity with the gift of difference, specifically, difference in tongue. Humanity is punished for trying to give themselves a pure name, that is, one name. See Gil Anijar, Acts of Religion (New York: Routledge, 2001), 107.
Fleming finds further evidence from epigraphic evidence at Emar which indicates that the nabû was the invocative expert, he or she who “invokes the gods in prayer, blessing, or divinatory/oracular inquiry.” (221) Most “early texts” in the Hebrew Bible tend to use the term in the same way.

For example in this verse from 1 Kings

1 Kings 18:26

The false prophets of Baal call on the “name of Baal” from morning until noon, saying “The Lord (Baal), answer us,” but there was no voice, no answer.

We find a similar example from 2 Kings:

2 Kings 5:11

In this verse Naaman, an Aramaean general, is enraged that the prophet Elisha did not come out, take a stand, and call on the name of Yahweh, his Elohim. Both passages associate the verb qārāʾ (קהר) meaning to call and the noun šēm or name (שם) with prophecy.

Like its near eastern antecedents, other early usages of the term prophet come in the context of divination. For example in the story about King Jehoshapat in 1 Kings 22, in which the “prophet” Micaiah is called to “inquire” (vr;D’) of the “word of Yahweh”. The term used in this verse for divinatory inquiry is dāraš, a word that transforms in later Hebrew into the word midrash, or interpretation. Similarly the word qārāʾ, “to call” shifts into the verb “to read aloud” in later Hebrew. We thus find a subtle transformation in the semantic field from divinatory interpretation to literary or textual interpretation (or divination).

To be too blunt, many Christian scholars who understandably read the Hebrew Bible as a prelude to the “New Testament” tend to see these shifts in tragic terms, representing a takeover of the notion of prophecy by scribes. It may be true


17 For example, in Schniedewind’s (2004) admirable book, the story about the “end of prophecy” is told from the perspective of someone who takes the Biblical sources at their word, as representations of reality. However, for my purposes the question should not be “why does prophecy cease?” but rather, “why is prophecy represented that way?”, or “why does the concept of prophecy change?” For the question, “Why did prophecy cease?” entails we have a clear idea of what prophecy was – which we do not, since it was always an ideological, not a historical construction. Schniedewind notes that concern over writing is central in the book of Deuteronomy, signaling the “textualization of the word” and the “eclipse of prophecy” during the reign of Josiah (187). Schniedewind understands writing as a fixation of the word, i.e. “writing freezes tradition.” (187) As a result, he sees prophecy in opposition to writing and scribalism. I hold a different interpretation altogether, illustrated by the fact that prophecy only became an important concept in the later Deuteronomistic, more scrially influenced, sources. The contrast between the oral and the written then becomes embodied in the concept of prophecy itself. But this is not because prophecy was usurped by scribes, but because a scribal mentality first drew these conceptual lines.
that these shifts illustrate a transition in the notion of prophecy from oral to more literary contexts, but from a Benjaminian perspective, while these shifts do represent something of a fall, they also offer the possibility for redemption. Writing has the potential to limit thought when it is understood as merely the visual representation of speech. However, writing need not be understood as the visual representation of speech, as we shall see below. For Benjamin, it is the unrecoverability of the word, not its manifestation, that marks the innovative step in scribal prophecy.18

Language (itself)

Early in his career Benjamin wrote to Gershom Scholem, famed scholar of Jewish mysticism, about his essay Über die Sprache überhaupt: “I do attempt to come to terms with the nature of language in this essay and... its immanent relationship to Judaism...”19 What did Benjamin mean by “the nature of language” and “Judaism”? Benjamin understood Judaism as form of linguistic mysticism, where the Bible provides a roadmap to understand the original and creative power of language. In other words, for Jews like Walter Benjamin, the Bible is interesting almost entirely and only in its reflection on language. Because of its particular historical engagement with written language, Judaism’s most radical element is its linguistic iconoclasm.20

So, by “the nature of language” Benjamin means its material existence, its materially existential effects in the world and on the world. By “Judaism”, Benjamin means the history of Biblical interpretation and commentary, especially as filtered through Gershom Scholem’s understanding of Jewish mysticism,21 a complex and ever-changing linguistic technology. The question of Benjamin’s relationship to Judaism was, as he

18 In traditional philosophy since Plato, the materiality of the letter was understood as the nonessential clothing for the true essential meaning. Like Benjamin, Derrida denies this, arguing that there is no content that could be present from event to event. Samuel Wheeler, in his comparison of Derrida and the Berkeley philosopher Donald Davidson argues that this denial of what he calls ‘magic language’ on the part of the two philosophers is their fundamental point of agreement. Wheeler writes, “The fundamental point of agreement between Derrida and Davidson, as well as other thinkers in the analytic tradition, such as Quine and Wittgenstein, is their denial of what I call the ‘magic language.’ This it the language of nous, a language that is, in Wittgenstein’s terms, self-interpreting. The magic language is the language in which we know what we mean, think our thoughts, and form intentions… Derrida argues that the presupposition of some form of magic language has determined the very project of philosophy from the beginning. Direct access to the Platonic Forms, Aristotle’s deliverances of nous, the ideas of the empiricist philosophers, and the sense data of the Vienna Circle are all versions of the magic language. We have a magic-language theory whenever a kind of term is alleged to be by its very nature ‘present’ to the mind. Accordingly, Derrida characterizes such positions as ‘presence’ theories, ‘presence’ being what Wilfred Sellars has termed ‘the myth of the given.’” See Samuel Wheeler, Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3. For Benjamin, the magic language is precisely that unrecoverable ground of language (itself).


20 See Susan Handelman, The slayers of Moses: the emergence of rabbinic interpretation in modern literary theory (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982). Most psychologists of writing recognize that alphabetic writing systems in some sense map speech. Even sign language has been shown to activate spoken registers in the brain. Researchers who study literacy in deaf children regard written language as a second language (they are bi-lingual), see Charlotte Evans, “Literary development in deaf students: case studies in bilingual teaching and learning,” American Annals of the Deaf 149:1, 2004, 17-27. It is important to recognize that written scripts are images, accessed through visual-cortical processes and different physiology than spoken language. In other words, we tend to forget that written scripts are visual arts (artifacts). For more on the history of the development of the alphabet, see the helpful (though dated) chapter by Frank Moore Cross, “The Invention and Development of the Alphabet” and in the volume, Frank Senner, The Origins of Writing (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979). More should be said about the relation between the imagistic and linguistic iconoclasms.

21 Benjamin wrote to Martin Buber in 1916 that, “the problem of the Jewish spirit is one of the most important and persistent objects of my thinking.” (Scholem and Adorno 1994, 79)
said, “always the question of how [Benjamin] stood in relation to Scholem.”

Benjamin begins his essay on language saying: “every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language, and this understanding, in the manner of a true method, everywhere raises new questions.” Language here, “means the tendency inherent” in human productions “toward communicating the contents of the mind.” Furthermore, “communication in words” is only “a particular case of human language.” (62, I) It is in the nature of all things, whether animate or inanimate, to communicate “mental content”. Thus we cannot imagine a “total absence of language” in anything. The expression of something more basic, perhaps better translated thought or consciousness, is communicated in language but is not itself language.

To unpack Benjamin’s statements a bit more we must first distinguish between language “itself” (or as such) and human language. Language itself is a tendency; a tendency to communicate the mind. Benjamin’s notion of language itself would be better translated as “communication”, a broader category in which human language is one member. More recent communication theorists might see the process Benjamin points to as any event between two entities where a change of input between the two affects output, with evolving levels of complexity. It is not necessarily exchange, but integrative interaction (or even coordination).

To spell out the bare bones of Benjamin’s notion of language itself further, we need recourse to his notion of “mimesis,” the root of primitive communication. As he later wrote in 1933, in “On the Mimetic Faculty”:

Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s. His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role.

He goes on to point out that the mimetic faculty, or nature’s compulsion to mimic, has both an ontogenetic sense and a phylogenetic sense. The former is exemplified in child’s play, during which a child imitates the world around her, whether that be a windmill or a cowboy. In this play, as in ritual, repetition

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22 See Scholem and Adorno 1994, 364. Benjamin was a theorist for whom a stroll through the city was a walking meditation. One notion in Benjamin’s Jewish mysticism is “Profane Illumination”, which might be thought of as his principle method. This notion is influenced by Jewish mystical practices of “worship through inversion” and “raising of the sparks” whereby the mystic descends to the levels of the profane matter to illumine godliness within them as a way to hasten the process of redemption. See the essay by Cheryl Beaver in the present volume. For more on the mysticism, see Moshe Idel, _Kabbalah: New Perspectives_ (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988); Eliot Wolfson, _Through a speculum that shines : vision and imagination in medieval Jewish mysticism_ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). For the Habad perspective, see Rachel Elior, _The paradoxical ascent to God: the kabbalistic theosophy of Habad Hasidism_ (trans. by Jeffrey Green) (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). And especially as it relates to Benjamin’s thought, Scholem’s classic _Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism_ (New York: Schocken Books).

23 This is an idea perhaps echoed by Noam Chomsky, who has argued that “human language is not properly regarded as a system of communication. It is a system for expressing thought, something quite different.” See Noam Chomsky, “Language and the Brain,” in _In Search of a Language for the Mind_ Brain, A. Saleemi, O. Bohm, and A. Gjedde, eds. (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2005).

24 See also: http://www.chicagoschoolmediatheory.net/glossary2004/mimesis.htm#ftn14

25 In this sense, for Benjamin thought is always constrained by personal history, by those objects of consciousness one was exposed to as a child. So, for example, there will be cognitive differences between children who grow up around (imitating) animals and those who grow up around (imitating) machines. See Paolo Verno (trans, Allecia Ricciardi), “Childhood and Critical Thought,” _Grey Room_ 21, Fall 2005, 7–12: “It has been noted that Walter
is the rule, as Benjamin writes in his essay “Toys and Play” (117ff, II): “for a child repetition is the soul of play... nothing gives him greater pleasure than to ‘Do it again!’”

The phylogenetic sense of the mimetic faculty concerns its natural history. Benjamin finds that mankind’s early interest in astrological divination is one of the primary manifestations of the mimetic faculty. In this case, we see similarity between the course of human events and the regular movement of the heavens. Benjamin is thus concerned with what might be termed metaphysical or cosmological similarity (or analogy), where human experience is analogous to events in nature. Benjamin finds that the mimetic faculty has transformed or even decayed over time, for “neither the mimetic powers nor mimetic objects remain the same in the course of thousands of years.” (720, II) The “gift” of mimesis has thus degraded, for “the perceptual world of modern man contains only minimal residues of the

Benjamin never removed his gaze from childhood. It also has been noted that he established with admirable timeliness the salient characteristics of the technical reproducibility of the work of art. What remains in the shadows is the very close link relating these two facts. Benjamin understood very quickly the new conditions of cultural production (photography, radio, cinema, genre novel) because he did not preclude himself from access to the experience of the child, from which he drew lessons about the fundamental tendencies of his time.” (8)

26 More must be said about Benjamin’s phenomenology of children’s toys. Verno relates these ideas more explicitly to Benjamin’s essay on artwork and aura: “Only a person who has spent a long time dwelling on children’s games characterized by the inexhaustible iteration of the same gestures and the same verbal formulas could understand the exact significance of seriality on a grand scale, which by now marks not only the culture industry but all the abyss of immediate experience. Reviewing a book on toys, Benjamin writes words that in certain respects could refer to the inhabitants of contemporary metropolises... The fascination of the ‘one more time’ typical of childhood extends to the technically reproducible experience. Already this consideration makes it impossible for Benjamin to indulge a nostalgic regret: because a profound need of the human species seems to find fulfillment in reproducibility, it is useless to sulk. The true question is the following: How is it that the society of advanced capitalism adopts a mode of childhood? What do the two have in common?” (9)

27 But for WB, neither is the word “the essence of the thing,” as “mystical linguistic theory” would have it. This is because from the radical perspective on communication, mimesis is the primary medium, and mimesis is never an exact replica.

28 “The mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer.” (722, II)

29 Specialists in child development have more commonly looked to the benefits of teaching sign language to infants because their ability to use language precedes their ability to speak. These infants experience less of the frustration that accompanies early attempts at communication. Most of these early signs are mimetic in Benjamin’s sense, for example the sign for “hunger” is a gesture of the hand moving to the mouth. For more on the neurological basis for the mimetic faculty, see the growing literature on “mirror neurons” in for example, V. Gallese and A. Goldman, “Mirror neurons and the simulation theory of mindreading,” Trends in Cognitive Sciences 2 (1998), 493–501.
imagine that the development of human language, though shrouded in mystery, had a similar process.  

This more primitive language underlying human language has been better understood in recent years, for example in the work of George Lakoff on metaphor, which finds thought to be predicated upon irreducible status of the body and its physiological (cognitive) relation to the environment. Similarly, as Benjamin noted in his fragment, “Experience”: “Experiences are lived similarities. There is no greater error than the attempt to construe experience – in the sense of life experience – according to the model on which the exact natural sciences are based... That experience and observation are identical has been shown.” (553, II) The renowned philosopher of language, Donald Davidson, had a similar idea concerning the veridical (truthful) nature of beliefs. The source of the original veridicality is the human body and the fact that all humans share our evolutionary endowment. Research in evolutionary psychology also postulates that “folk” thought (biology, sociology, psychology, ontology) arose over hundreds of thousands of years of relatively stable existence as hunter-gatherers somewhere in east Africa. Though Benjamin perhaps envisioned a period of time more recent (“ancient”), I think this primeval period should be our reference point now when we think of Benjamin’s notion of a primitive substratum to thought or consciousness, which is in some sense more real than other strata.  

Benjamin goes on to make some very insightful and mysterious points. He asks, in what way signs (words) that “mean the same thing” in different languages share similarity to the signified “at their center”? He includes not only spoken signs in this analysis, for “our reflections cannot be restricted to the spoken word. They are equally concerned with the written word. And here it is noteworthy that the latter – and in some cases more vividly than the spoken word – illuminates, by the relation of its written form to the signified, the nature of nonsensuous similarity.” (721)  

To answer this question, Benjamin calls our attention to the mimetic faculty at work in writing: “it may be supposed that the mimetic process which expresses itself in this way in the activity of the writer was, in the very distant times when script originated, of utmost importance for writing.” He notes that the reading of the cosmos, and more generally “entrails, stars, or dances,” are
the most ancient... Later the mediating link of a new kind of reading, of runes and hieroglyphs, came into use. It seems fair to suppose that these were the stages by which the mimetic gift, formerly the foundation of occult practices, gained admittance to writing and language. In this way, [written] language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earliest powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic. (722, II)

With these notes on the divinatory mimetic faculty and its relation to writing, we may return now to Benjamin’s earlier essay, “On language...” Benjamin distinguishes between communicating through human language and communicating in language itself. He argues that nothing is communicated through language. That is, nothing like content is communicated through human language. But in the process of language, something is communicated. For Benjamin, communication is never an exact copy, mimesis points rather to a process of embodying resemblance. That is, language (itself) is “in its purest sense the

35 I offer that this is not a nostalgic or romantic reading of the past, but is quite realistic and political. History has no purpose unless it can be engaged critically. We thus must ask the question whether we are progressing or moving backwards at any particular moment in time. It is not romantic to recognize we could go either way. The compelling question further concerns the stability of that formative period in the evolution of homo sapiens and our folk categories (physics, sociology, biology), or whether it is an essential part of being human that we are constantly changing.

36 For more on the connection between writing, magic, and animism, see the illuminating, Romantic, discussion in David Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996). Abram argues that the ecological crisis of modern man’s exploitative relation to nature is encouraged by Europe’s relation to materiality, which “disparages sensorial reality, denigrating the visible and tangible order of things on behalf of some absolute source...” (94) “Each of these two ancient cultures [ancient Hebrews and ancient Greeks] seems to have sown the seeds of our contemporary estrangement – one seeming to establish the spiritual or religious ascendancy of humankind over nature, the other effecting more philosophical or rational dissociation of the human intellect from the organic world.” (95) Abram finds that the scribal animism of early Hebrew scribes represents a new type of reflection, for “the scribe, or author, could now begin to dialogue with his own visible inscriptions, viewing and responding to his own words even as he wrote them down. A new power of reflexivity was thus coming into existence, borne by the relation between the scribe and his scripted text.” (107) Though literacy may lead to an intellectual distance from natural order and the expelling of the gods from the natural world, at the same time, scribal animism represented by early Hebrew has the potential to break us from our estrangement with nature, because “the Hebrew scribes never lost this sense of the letters as living, animate powers.” (132-133) “Here in other words was an intensely concentrated form of animism – a participation conducted no longer with the sculpted idols and images worshipped by other tribes but solely with the visible letters of the aleph-beth.” (133) See 96, 100, 107, 130, 131.
‘medium’ of the communication” and mediation “is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic.” (64) Since nothing is communicated through human language, the magic points to something further: language’s “infiniteness”. In other words, resemblance is of a higher order than the mimetic faculty, which is simply the most basic element in communication. We might then think of mimesis as the first stage of ‘representation’.

Thus for Benjamin language expresses itself in human language, which is just one technology among others, for "there is no such thing as a content of language; as communication, language communicates a mental entity – something communicable per se.” (66, 1) The same would apply to the notion of translation: “It is necessary to found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory, for it is much too far-reaching and powerful to be treated in any way as an afterthought, as has happened occasionally.” For Benjamin meaningful content is not an entity transmitted between translations, “[A literary work’s] essential quality is not communication or the imparting of information.”37 Rather each act of translation is the production of something new. In other words, translation is the nature of language, not a method for converting one language into another. One of his modern reviewers summarizes his semiotics as follows: “First, there is the thesis that the word is a ‘creative’ force that does not communicate the meaning of nature, but rather does nature. Second, there is the thesis that in the name matter communicates itself, not something other than itself. The name is the ‘community’ of material things – and therefore ‘magical’…

Neither word nor name represents anything, but together they move matter, as if by magic.”38

Another way to put this is to say that there is nothing more to language than the mental entity which language communicates. But what are these mental entities that language communicates?

A brief turn away from Benjamin might help elucidate this idea. The closest correlate to Benjamin’s notion in the Anglo-American tradition is William James notion of “radical empiricism” and subsequent notions of “radical translation.”39 In a section entitled, “Is consciousness an emergent property of matter?” which amounts to a defense of the notion that consciousness may continue after bodily death, Alan Wallace describes William James’s notion of consciousness as follows:

Modern advances in the neurosciences have made it abundantly clear that there are very specific correlations between mental processes and brain functions. More than a century ago, William James proposed three feasible theories to account for such correlations: (1) the brain produces thoughts, as an electric circuit produces light; (2) the brain releases, or permits, mental events, as the trigger of a crossbow releases an arrow by removing the obstacle that holds the string; and (3) the brain transmits


38 Christopher Bracken, “The language of things: Walter Benjamin’s primitive thought,” Semiotica 138:1 (2002), 323. Bracken notes Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics was also published in 1916, though Benjamin probably did not know about it: “It is worth noting that the theory of the arbitrariness of the sign is affirmed and rejected in the same year.” (323-324)

thoughts, as light hits a prism, thereby transmitting a surprising spectrum of colors... 40

Benjamin’s more subtle conception of mental life further foreshadows one of the most compelling theories of language in recent years, that of Oxford professor of Linguistics, Roy Harris, called “integrationism”. Harris takes issue with those he calls “fixed code theorists” who think that a linguistic code is the medium through which human beings communicate with one another. In this model, communication is the exchange of meaning or content. Instead,

Integrationism is a philosophy of language which rejects fixed-code semantics... In this approach, meaning is treated as being radically indeterminate, whether expressed by words or by non-verbal signs... the integrationist view of communication is one which reverses most of the usual assumptions that have dominated Western philosophy of language from at least the fifth century BC onwards. For integrationists, a language is not an independent system, on the basis of which communication is possible. Integrationists, in fact, recognize no autonomous system of signs, either verbal or non-verbal... The integrationist alternative to fixed codes construes communication as a continuum of creative activities in which the participants strive to integrate their own actions and objectives with those of others, as best they may, in particular circumstances... In integrational semiology, signs are not...

prerequisites for communication, but its products. 41

Written Language (itself)

Like Benjamin, Harris understands that language is not an independent system. What Harris calls the continuum of creative activities, Benjamin would call language itself. Thus, both see that human language is integrated with language itself. Signs are not the bearers of content, but its signals. Like Harris (and Davidson and Derrida), Benjamin’s anti-representational theory of language flips the traditional representationalist view of media, for Benjamin understood all media in relation to language itself, not human language.

Benjamin and Harris give us some compelling tools to think about written language, which plays a central role in their theories. First, we recognize that writing is a completely different mode of communication than speech, just as sculpture is a completely different medium for expressing language (itself) than painting: “the differences between languages are those of media that are distinguished as it were by their density – that is gradually...” (66, I) For Benjamin, writing mediates with both human language and language itself. It is the latter however that gives writing its power. Written scripts for Benjamin are not just a visible representation of spoken human language, rather writing captures the primitiveness of the mimetic faculty, “a medium into which the earliest powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic” (722, II). Writing begins to compete with other forms of magic when it is first introduced. 42 Literary iconoclasm, such as the polemic against


divination, has its roots in this competition. If writing is no longer thought of as the dead body of speech but rather the expression of something just as fundamental, we are also compelled to radically rethink literacy.

Second, writing is itself the major factor that accounts for the false theory of language as content-bearing representation because we confuse the more stable referents of visual marks as a fundamental element in speech. As you read this text, you have the words themselves right there present in front of you (either on a computer screen or printed in ink on the page). Because written language is present in a way that speech is not, it is easy to slip into thinking of speech along the model of a text. Of course, in neither case is anything like “meaningful content” exchanged between writer/reader or speaker/hearer. If you are reading this text, the only input from me is that I have caused some marks on my computer to be arranged in certain ways. Photons from the sun or a light bulb in turn are absorbed by the black (fire) of the ink on your page, while the whiteness that surrounds it reflects the light into your retina, where physiological mechanisms convert that energy into electrical and chemical energy which your embodied-brain then “reads”.

The material input of writing is the materiality of light and vision. In the case of speech we would be discussing the physics of the vibration of air molecules between speaker and hearer, the physiology of the ear.

43 Benjamin’s statement to Martin Buber in a letter written in July 1916 concerning Buber’s journal Der Jude is relevant: “I can understand writing as such as poetic, prophetic, objective in terms of its effect, but in any case only as magical, that is as un-mediated. Every salutary effect, indeed every effect not inherently devastating, that any writing may have resides in its (the word’s, language’s) mystery. In however many forms language may prove to be effective, it will not be so through the transmission of content, but rather through the purist disclosure of its dignity and its nature… Only the intensive aiming of words into the core of intrinsic silence is truly effective…” See Scholem and Adorno 1994, 80. Benjamin goes on to say that he is cannot understand nor write in a way designed “to have an effect” (81).

44 For more on the rudiments of the physiology of religion, see my essay in the previous volume of Epoche.

45 See Roy Harris (ed.), The Language Myth in Western Culture
because their preliterate conception of language cannot immediately cope with the forms of integration involved.

The second reason is no less important. By making it possible to divorce the message both from its sender and from the original circumstances of its formulation... the text takes on a life of its own.  

This highly theoretical argument surprisingly has empirical support. Though very few laboratory researchers have been interested in the cognitive consequences of literacy, David Olson’s lab combines a sophisticated conception of writing with empirical methods. In terms of the second point above, that writing tends to lead to the language myth, Olson has found that children’s developing conception of “word” is based on a model derived from literacy. More generally, literacy alters, and in some ways makes possible, reflection on spoken language such that “children’s early metalinguistic concepts are influenced, if not determined by, experience with writing.” Thus, “some understanding of written text mediates children’s concept of the word.” In other words, literate people (of varying skills) have a tendency to model language in terms of written language, for better or worse.

In terms of the first point above, in another essay, “What writing is,” Olson finds that “neither historically nor developmentally was writing adequately thought of as transcription or putting down of an oral utterance, that is, of speech.” And asks, “What then is writing?” Recognizing that this question is too complex for a simple answer, Olson boils down two necessary features: “The first, well known, is that writing is sufficiently fixed and permanent that it can be read in a context other than that in which it was produced, by readers for whom it was not intended. Secondly, writing systems map on to language rather than on to either the world or ideas or meanings directly.” (243)

Olson goes on to hypothesize that writing should be understood as a second order process, that writing is “intrinsically reflective,” and written symbols are “in principle metalinguistic.” (243) He sees writing as similar to quotation (or overhearing speech); it involves an essential decoupling of

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48 See Olson, 2001. Olson writes, “Harris (1986) was largely responsible for reopening the question more or less closed off by the standard assumption that writing is conceptually innocent, a ‘simple cipher’ on speech as Mattingly (1972) put it. Harris showed that early writing systems give little evidence of recording or representing the properties of verbal utterance. That early writing systems captured properties of speech such as sounds, words, and sentences in an incomplete and haphazard way suggested to him that early writers had a limited understanding of the linguistic structure of their own speech and that inventing writing systems was as much a matter of discovering the properties of language as it was of representing them by visible marks. In his later work Harris (2000:211) has argued that the relation between speech and writing is largely contingent. It is only such practices as dictation (speech to writing) and reading aloud (writing to speech) that result in some degree of articulation of linguistic forms in terms of visual, graphic categories. Developmental psychological research has tended to confirm this view, showing that as children learn to read and write they come to think about their spoken language in a new, more analytic or metarepresentational way (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982; Olson 1994, 1996; Vernon and Ferreiro 1999). Thus neither historically nor developmentally was writing adequately thought of as transcription or putting down of an oral utterance, that is, of speech. What then is writing?”
propositions from their normative use.\textsuperscript{49} For Olson writing inherently lies on the mention poll of the use/mention distinction. He notes that quotation has been understood by linguists and philosophers to lead to “the property of referential opacity, the nonsubstitutability of co-referential expressions within the quoted clause.” These are notorious features of belief statements, as Boyer intimates in his discussion of religious beliefs.\textsuperscript{50}

Furthermore, “both direct and indirect quotation are means of representing an idea without oneself asserting it as true. One could argue along with Frege that such devices make thought, i.e., entertaining some content without either asserting or denying it, possible.” (246) In other words, “thinking is seen as a kind of saying to oneself” (245) and writing, similarly, is quoting oneself. In this sense, though the phonetics of language may be closer to the memory storage of signs, writing may serve a better analogy for propositional thought. Writing, unlike speech, is a form of composition, akin to a musical score. In sum, “writing should be seen neither as completely different from speech nor as identical to speech but rather as being related to the reflexive property of speech exploited in quotation. This in turn suggests that writing is in principle reflexive and metarepresentational while direct speech, typically, is not.”\textsuperscript{51}


\textsuperscript{50} See Boyer 2001, 129-131.

\textsuperscript{51} Olson goes on to cite evidence that competence in writing is related to competence with reflexive language. See Olson 2001, 247ff.

\textbf{Concluding Remarks}

To summarize and conclude, in the first section I made a case concerning a transformation from divination to prophecy, which develops out of competition for hermeneutic salience between literate guilds and illiterate religious specialists, a shift signaled in the semantic field of the Hebrew text. I then discussed Benjamin’s notion of language itself, arguing that the mimetic faculty is what makes language itself possible. Human language is one expression of language itself among many. It is a specialized and somewhat degraded form of the language itself, because of its arbitrary relation to the world. But language itself is still part of human language; it is especially present in writing where language still retains is proximity to magic. Writing makes hypostasis of language possible in a way that oral traditions, even ritualized ones such as the Vedas, do not. However, writing also makes it likely that the word becomes reified, taking on characteristics of what Roy Harris calls, “the language myth”.

Benjamin and Harris thus point to a similar Fall, what Benjamin calls the “bourgeois conception of language”. For Benjamin, “the Fall marks the birth of the human word…” (71, 1) There was a time when words were identical with what they communicated (a perfect mimesis) and now words have become \textit{mere} signs. Benjamin notes the threefold linguistic significance of the Fall: 1) the mimetic name-language (on which “poetry is partly, if not solely, founded,” see page 73, 1) becomes mere signs (language becomes mediate), 2) the language of judgment, 3) the origin of abstraction. (71-72) But this is a recoverable position through written language that does not reify the word but rather embodies a magical mimesis.

Biblical prophecy thus isolates a period in time when the language myth was popularized as a response to the invention of written language and the alphabet. The language myth develops along with Biblical prophecy, in its capacity for naming, and in its metadiscoursive reflection on the word. Prophecy is one
precipitation of the conceptual shifts caused by a new literary class reflecting on language itself. So while writing retains some of the magic of the mimetic faculty, at the same time it tends to make us think the word is fixed, stable, and thus transferable. However, for Benjamin and other scholars with a proper ontological conception of writing, writing is closer to propositional life, an embodiment of language itself, not just the spoken word.

The consequences of these arguments for the study of religion are worth enunciating. There are a few conceptual elements I am tying together that I would like to reiterate. First, we have the idea that a transition of sorts took place in the “cognitive style” of *homo sapiens* with the “advance” of literacy. Second, we have Olson’s attempt to tie writing to metarepresentation, what has elsewhere been called decoupling, or in the older Fregean terminology: “referential opacity of second order propositional statements”. These concepts all differ in some respects, but where they overlap is in their focus on the developed human ability to embed propositions in other propositions, to put it simply, our ability to “entertain” beliefs. Olson finds that literacy tends to bias this very ability. Third, we have Benjamin’s assertion about the nature of language and its relation to human language. Finally, we have the notion of competition between the newly formed literate guilds and the illiterate religious specialists, from which the conception of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible was an outgrowth. Benjamin (and Harris to some extent) conceived of these innovations as Falls. Benjamin is actually quite explicit about where he sees the competition taking place, it is between the mimetic faculty spread wide over nature and the particularly powerful one embedded in scripts, in letters: “a medium into which the earliest powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.”

Religion, we may think of as a return to the materiality of writing as a first order form of reflection. Writing is a magical act that reaches the tribunal of experience primarily through the sense of sight. Resistance to the threat of routinization posed by writing can only be countered by recognition of this fact. If as I have argued the “bourgeois conception of language” (the language myth) is indeed a byproduct of the invention of writing, those who encourage a turn away from it, from the idea of an original and essential substance communicated through language, must therefore take recourse in the materiality of writing.