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Walter Benjamin's Dialectics of Attentiveness

Walter Benjamin's literary, phenomenological, and analytical reflections on the concept of attentiveness reveal how distinctly his critical thinking was attuned to new forms of perception that arose from the cultural and aesthetic transformations taking place in the early twentieth century. Challenging existing distinctions between different modes of attentiveness—mainly absorption and concentration—he explores a radical form of attentiveness that enlists unexpected components, such as distraction or the power of habit. Tracing the development of a critical approach to the concept from the early to the late works, this article provides insights into Benjamin's alternative idea of attentiveness, one that emerges from a dialectics of opposites and is aligned with a "physical presence of mind" ("leibhaftige Geistesgegenwart*").*

The philosophical tradition often perceives contemplative absorption and deliberate concentration as contrasting forms of attentiveness. Whereas absorption suggests the dissolution of the boundaries of the self, a devotion to the objects at hand, and a merging with the phenomena perceived; concentration restricts the field of vision, condenses the focus, and leads to a sharpened apprehension of things. Walter Benjamin's work contains a critique of both forms of attentiveness. In numerous literary, phenomenological, and analytical observations he refutes both a tacitly rapt, contemplative devotion to the world (*Welthingabe*) and a voluntaristic, focused mastery of its appearances (*Weltzugriff*) (Niesseler 473). Instead, he conflates absorption and concentration and proposes alternative constellations, in which the apparent antagonists of these two modes of perception are enlisted for yet another form of attentiveness. In contradiction to the idea that defamiliarization is the stipulation for true attention, Benjamin posits the power of habit. Moreover, he contradicts the notion that nonreflected actions are contrary to

concentration by calling for the "alert gesture" ("den hurtigen Handgriff") (*SW 1:* 482)[1] as the decisive response. Often seen as the converse of attentive composure, distraction is touted by Benjamin as the appropriate mode of perception for his times. Manifesting themselves in his later materialistic texts, these paradoxical views can already be found in his earlier works, albeit under different auspices.

"BEFORE YOU KNOW THE BODIES ON THIS STAR" (*SW 1:* 353)

"Foremost among the human capacities, according to Goethe, is attention" (*SW 2.2:* 592). Introducing "Habit and Attentiveness," a reflection that is part of Benjamin's *Ibizan Sequence* written in April and May 1932, this quotation alludes to a topic that can be traced back to Benjamin's early essay on Goethe's *Elective Afffinities*. On the morning after the double adultery, which stands at the center of Goethe's novel and takes place in the realm of fantasy, the narrator notices a curious absence amidst the four protagonists. The first sentence of the chapter following the adultery scene reads: "When they all met again at breakfast, an acute observer (*aufmerksamer Beobachter*) would have been able to discern the innermost thoughts and emotions of each one of them from his and her behavior" (Goethe 98). The narrator makes use of the conjunctive form to point out the absence of an attentive onlooker and implicitly hints at the protagonists' own lack of attentiveness. Indeed, the scene reveals that the crisscrossed lovers are curiously unable to read each other's bodily signs and the significance of the objects surrounding them. In the novel, excessive passion leads to a blinding confusion between reality and wishful thinking, just as excessive rationality leads to an excess of cautious incredulity and, in its wake, to a loss of astute perception. Both attitudes result in tragedy, which suggests that, for Goethe, only a balanced measure can ensure a poised and harmonious, properly symbolic perception, in which "nature is 'never dead or mute"' and that unveils the meaning of its signs to "the attentive observer" (*SW 1:* 303).

In his essay on Goethe's novel, Benjamin points to the protagonists' fatal misreading of signs when he states that "the unheeded omens all prove true," while the "only one that is heeded, turns out to be deceptive" (*SW 1:* 306). This misapprehension is not, in itself, the true origin of the drama, nor would a balanced measure be its resolution. Benjamin traces the catastrophe back to two ostensibly contrasting forms of attention: silent contemplation and interpretative fury. In both forms he recognizes mirror images of Goethe's own duality, the simultaneity of a "taciturn withdrawal into himself," on the one hand, and a "concern, exaggerated into paradox, for the material contents of his own life," which causes him "to admire everything, to find everything 'significant, marvelous, incalculable"' (*SW 1:* 318). At the root of this indiscriminate attribution of significance "developed to

an utterly ridiculous degree," as Gervinus comments, is the fear of responsibility. It causes the Goethean spirit to become paralyzed in the midst of a "chaos of symbols" (*SW 1:* 319). Similarly, according to Benjamin, the lovers in Goethe's novel fail to encounter one another because they are either subsumed by a silent vita contemplativa, in which "the view of the most splendid one (*der Herrlichsten*) is more longed for than a union with the beloved" (*SW 1:* 352), or because they are so caught up in interpreting signs that they become incapable of "decision and action." As the final lines of Benjamin's essay assert, this failure is due to their inability to ever "grasp the body" (*den Leib zu ergreifen*). Unable to overcome nature, they act as Goethe did in his own life "and land among signs and oracles" (*SW 1:* 319). Hence, the lovers interpret their world instead of acting upon it. They forfeit the redemptive moment of active decision, which, in the tale of the strange neighborly children—the short novella Goethe inserted into his larger novel—is expressed in a spontaneous, unreflected leap that leads to happiness. In Benjamin's early essay, happiness appears to him as worldly only to the degree that it is also transcendent or a form of "blessed life" ("*seliges Leben*") (*SW 1:* 320). Because of the death-defying leap into the raging river, the neighborly children are not so much united as taking a concerted action by clutching each other's bodies, "each one wholly alone for himself before God" (*SW 1:* 343).

THE "SPIRIT-BODY": THE OTHER ABSORPTION

In a fragment entitled "About Dread" (*GS* 75–77), written at the same time as the Goethe essay, it is not in action but in absorption that the individual stands "alone for himself before God." The first sentence of the fragment reads, "Dread ensues most readily at the point of awakening from a condition of deep contemplation and concentration" (75). Here, the difference between the two forms of perception is not nearly as important as that between absence and presence of mind (*Geistesabwesenheit* and *Geistesgegenwart*). Benjamin terms the latter "divine," suggesting that it is experienced in prayer, the "complete immersion in God and in one's self." It also serves as "the best protection from dread." In contrast to this immersion of the spirit in prayer, Benjamin discerns an "equally profound, but always absentminded absorption when immersed in something foreign" (76). He compares this form of immersion with an "eddy of the soul" ("*Strudel der Seele*"), "into which the absentminded body is sucked up and loses its powers." A body without spirit is divested of boundaries. As a result, "what is perceived overwhelms it" (76). In this paradoxical turn, loss of self does not result from total immersion in God or self, but from an incomplete absorption in the other, a state in which both parties lose their contours. Benjamin counters the danger involved in such a loss of boundaries—a drowning in the eddy—with a more

radical rather than a weaker form of absorption. Such absorption—in God and in prayer—is the guarantee for the integrity of the body. Benjamin designates this concentration "spirit-body" ("*Geist-Leib*"). The alliance suggested in this word evokes a metaphysical dimension that Benjamin explains with an afterthought: "Very importantly: in conjunction with the weakening of the body in a state of dread, language, as the opposing pole, disappears both as expression—the possibility of which emerges as unfathomable grace—and as habit, which appears as a somnambulistic walk on a tightrope" (77). In opposition to the false, spiritless, and silent absorption, from which one awakens to confront dread, Benjamin does not proffer any consciously controlled form of concentration that might help to offset it. Rather, he proposes a somnambulistically confident, at once common and uncontrollable attentiveness to the corporeal, which is embodied in language.

"CORPOREAL PRESENCE": THE OTHER CONCENTRATION

For Benjamin, relief from mindless immersion does not lie in its expected counterpart, the consciousness of the awake, but from a state opposed to both: an unconscious, bodily confidence. A similar idea can be found in "Madame Ariane: Second Courtyard on the Left" (*SW 1:* 482–83), part of a collection of texts that Benjamin titled *One Way Street*. However, here, it is no longer a question of alternative forms of absorption but of concentration. Benjamin sublates the difference between a passive acquiescence and a consciously driven mastery of the phenomena, countering both with a competence that he borrows from the archaic practice of telepathy. "Primitive epochs," he states, "when such demeanor was part of man's daily life, provided him with the most reliable instrument of divination: the naked body" (*SW 1:* 483). Since the trust in this instrument has been lost in modernity, astrology or the sounding out of destiny in "cards, spirits, stars" is a treacherous substitute. The fortune-teller Madame Ariane stands for those false interpreters of signs who, far from revealing the path out of the labyrinth, seduce one into inertia: "He who asks fortune-tellers the future unwittingly forfeits an inner intimation of coming events that is a thousand times more exact than anything they might say." It is not a matter of reviving occult rites but of "the only desirable telepathic miracle," the "naked body."

In keeping with the same unconscious precision that is accorded to the somnambulist tightrope walker, "omens, presentiments, signals pass day and night through our organism like wave impulses. To interpret them or to use them: that is the question. The two are, however, incompatible." The efficacy of these signs does not make allowances for hesitation: "If we neglect to act upon them, and only then, their message is deciphered. We read it. But now it is too late." Only in direct and spontaneous reactions does Benjamin perceive the redemptive alternative to

the missed opportunities that occur when the protagonists linger on the fateful signs in *Elective Affinities*. The Goethean figures read the signs too late. Staring at the oracle, Goethe's protagonists acquiesce and succumb to destiny; they fail to grasp the decisive moment for taking action, the spontaneous and unreflected "alert gesture" ("*hurtigen Handgriff*"), with which the neighborly children rip their destiny apart in the novella. The children escape from their destiny and win the bridal garment that stands in opposition to Ottilie's shroud, because they grasp the decisive moment, much as each morning of the day lies "like a fresh shirt on our bed." Benjamin stresses that "the happiness of the next twenty-four hours depends on our ability, on waking, to pick it up" (*SW 1:* 483). In his essay *Elective Affinities,* as well as in this later text, a preconscious, unreflected decision counters both passive contemplation and calculating choice. Inspired action, arising from a state of alertness, is no longer dependent on a "blessed life" but becomes a carpe diem of the quotidian. For Benjamin, however, this notion implicitly retains a theological dimension or a "weak messianic power" tied to the fleeting moment in a situation that is grasped by a "physical presence of spirit" ("*leibhaftige Geistesgegenwart*").

Benjamin answers Madame Ariane's false prophecies with the notion of a truly saving attentiveness, in which a trust in the signals of the body stemming from archaic societies is matched by the Jewish telos of the historic moment and the messianic potential inherent in it. In his study of Jewish mysticism, Benjamin's friend Gershom Scholem characterizes devotional prayer as the "silken cord with the aid of which the mystical intention of the mind gropes its dangerous way through the darkness toward God." Because "every world and every sphere is in continuous movement," Scholem affirms that there is "a new *Kawwanah* [devotional attentiveness in prayer] for every new moment." Scholem strikingly continues his observations in the spirit of a bodily metaphor: "True prayer huddles against the rhythm of the hour for which and in which it speaks" (276–77).

LESSONS OF THE BODY: THE OTHER CONVENTION

Beginning with the Goethe passage cited above, "Habit and Attentiveness" substantiates Benjamin's desire to fathom physical experiences that lie beyond conscious and habitual horizons integrated into the living world of daily routine. "All attentiveness has to flow into habit, if it is not to blow us apart, and all habit must be disrupted by attentiveness, if it is not to paralyze us. To note something and to accustom oneself to it, to take offense and put up with a thing—these are the peaks and troughs of the waves on the sea of the soul" (*SW 2.2:* 592). The simplicity of this introductory premise is deceptive. For, far from lending credence to a Goethean harmony of sequential polarities, Benjamin has the contrasting forces

revert into each other to the point where their extremes yield an intensified bodily presence of mind. These powers originate from the physical states of pain—a concentrated form of attentiveness—and from sleep—its minimal degree and the state of extreme habit. When they reach their extremes, these states of maximal and minimal attentiveness are transformed into their counterpart: Benjamin calls them "moments of calm for the soul" ("*Windstillen der Seele*"). He describes how "a person who is wholly concentrated on a thought that torments him, on a pain and its sudden twinges, can suddenly be disconcerted by a barely perceptible noise, an insect humming or flying that might well have escaped the notice of a more attentive and sharper ear" (*SW 2.2:* 592). Hence, there is an attentiveness that reaches beyond concentration; it distinguishes itself by being able to hear minute sounds and is not fixed on a narrow, isolating perception that is, at the same time, the most vulnerable form of attentiveness.

Benjamin does not stop at the paradoxical and comprehensible conclusion that the soul "can be more easily distracted, the more concentrated it is." Listening to the distracting noise is not, for him, the end but "the furthest development of attention." It is the moment "when from its womb, habit is born." Those who are unable to grasp the interruption of the steadiest form of concentration to return to the accustomed world, but instead transcend it, find themselves in another region, a world "in which pain reigns supreme." Undistracted concentration on pain turns into habit, implying that the deleterious condition is then devoid of its negative impact and becomes a secondary world, which transcends the travails of everyday life. When brought to an extreme, it is thus not habit, but attentiveness that ultimately turns into paralysis. "But even habit has its complement," Benjamin's continues, "and we cross its threshold in sleep." In the throes of the monotony of sleep, a new attention (*neues Merken*) arises that stems from dreams: "For what comes to us when we dream is a new and unprecedented attentiveness that struggles to emerge from the womb of habit." While sleep transforms itself into a new form of attentiveness, this dream-world remains just as unworldly as the region of pain: "In dreams there is no astonishment and in pain there is no forgetting." Benjamin reverses the contradictions once again, since what has been made available in dreams does not regenerate experience. The wonder of dreams is accepted passively and becomes habitual, much as the acceptance of pain does not incite any healing through an "active," Nietzschean form of "forgetting," but only a passive one. Benjamin is neither concerned with a stoical acceptance of pain nor with a "new attentiveness" in an unconscious state, but with the desire to bring these experiences back into a routine consciousness that is capable of astonishment and of forgetting. Hence, the lessons provided by pain and sleep are equidistant to contemplative absorption and deliberate concentration. Pain and sleep do not cause self-dissolution, nor can they be enlisted voluntarily, but both

are absorbed into a "physical presence of mind" that is required for a redemptive intervention and for taking hold of the day.

THE "PHYSICAL SHOCK EFFECT": THE OTHER DISTRACTION

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (*SW 3:* 101–33), Benjamin develops the dialectics of attentiveness to its most explicit degree, lending it a historical and a political dimension. Both contemplation and concentration are regarded as bourgeois modes of perception, while redemptive forces are derived from their common opposites, distraction and habit. Benjamin contrasts the bourgeois art connoisseur's passive, contemplative immersion in the work of art with the "heightened presence of mind" of spectators of films. He also counters criticism levied against the medium that perceives film as a diversion from political goals; the physical awareness of the distraction arising from the film's moving images and its sudden change of scenes becomes, for Benjamin, a training in alertness that is badly needed in times of a "heightened danger to life." Film becomes an "agent in the fight against the existing social order." Similarly, Benjamin contrasts willful concentration with the casual glimpse bestowed on architectural structures. In this vein, also architectural reception becomes a lesson in political action: "For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by means of [. . .] contemplation. They are mastered gradually [. . .] through habit" (*SW 3:* 120). Although attentiveness is generally associated with a defamiliarization of habitual perception, Benjamin sees in habit the kind of attention that involuntarily and unconsciously nourishes a "physical presence of mind." Performing yet another dialectical turn, Benjamin succeeds in merging his opposing approaches to attentiveness: "Even the distracted person can form habits. What is more: the ability to master certain traits in a state of distraction first proves that their performance has become habitual" (*SW 3:* 120). Only when the kind of alertness that results from distraction is no longer dependent on a conscious choice, but manifests itself spontaneously in all forms of daily life, only then does it become the liberating readiness through which opportunities can be seized and dangers recognized.

Benjamin's artwork essay invokes differing types of attentiveness for yet another form of political critique. Contemplation, raptness, prayer, and self-possession—all of which are presented in the essay—occur in the individual. Benjamin contrasts these attributes with the distraction of the masses, which are generally considered to be searching for nothing more than diversion in a work of art. Questioning this assumption, Benjamin writes, "This calls for closer examination. Distraction and absorption form an antithesis, which may be formulated as follows. Someone who collects himself while contemplating a work of art is

absorbed by it; he enters into the work. [. . .] By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide" (*SW 3:* 119). Benjamin's metaphor depicts the circumstances in which what is perceived does not make itself fully accessible to the observer, nor does it allow the observer to fully engross himself in what he sees.

In all of the examples cited above, Benjamin uses water as a metaphor to describe attentiveness and its consequences. In *Elective Affinities* he differentiates between the "raging river," which is touted as a "redemptive power" in the smaller novella, and the "lethal power of stagnant waters" in the larger novel's scenario. "Water as the chaotic element of life," Benjamin writes, "does not threaten here in desolate waves that sink a man; rather, it threatens in the enigmatic calm that lets him go to his ruin" (*SW 1:* 303). Stagnant water is the element that points to the abyss, into which humans bound to nature are pulled down: "Therefore, the peace that harmony ought to lend them does not fall to their lot. [. . .] What reigns [in the novel] is the quiet before the storm, while in the novella there is tempest and peace" (*SW 1:* 345). In "About Dread" absorption is likened to the "eddies" that pull one down into an abyss that also swallows all that is spiritual. In "Madame Ariane," the "signals pass day and night through our organism like wave impulses" (*SW 1:* 483). In "Habit and Attentiveness" the "peaks and troughs of the waves" form "the sea of the soul," which at moments of complete calm cross the threshold of living existence and come to a standstill in pain and dreams. As in the contrast between the masses, which absorb the artwork in their stream, and the individual, who is engulfed by its contemplation, all the water metaphors point to the necessity of *movement,* which counteracts both the static timelessness of absorption and the rigidity of fixed concentration. This movement, in which the "peaks and troughs of the waves" never stop, corresponds to the movement in Benjamin's dialectics of extremes. The only standstill that these thought images summon up is the "alert dexterity" that causes the dialectics to cease in a flash to do justice to the opportunity afforded by the moment.

Whereas Goethe views attentiveness, cleanliness, and diligence as the stabilizing virtues of the bourgeoisie (*bürgerliche Tugenden*),[2] Benjamin, in his early work, perceives attentiveness as a readiness to act "for himself before God," and later he discovers it as a tool for political resistance and action. From his earliest to his latest writings, Benjamin's definition of redemptive attentiveness is linked to spontaneous and inspired deeds. Starting with a critique of indecision that is still theologically inspired, the concept of attentiveness is transformed in his later works into an appeal to a heightened presence of mind that is responsive to historical and political dangers. Throughout this development, failures in both the private and collective spheres result from a deficient attentiveness, while redemption is its inherent potential. In the early works, attentiveness appears as the medium of the

redemption from the "nexus of guilt among the living" ("*Schuldzusammenhang von Lebendigem*") before God (*SW 1:* 307); in the later texts it embodies the spontaneous readiness to fulfill the promise of worldly happiness and vigilance against an equally worldly enemy. What remain constant throughout are the corresponding distance that separates Benjamin from a defeatist subjection to the world, on the one hand, and its voluntaristic mastery on the other. What differs between the early and later texts is the space in which Benjamin allows the uncontrollable part of attentiveness to surface and the sphere on which it is to act.

Notes

[1]In the text citations, hereinafter *SW* refers to Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, accompanied by the volume and page number(s), and *GS* to *Gesammelte Schriften VI.*

[2]In the *Notes and Queries* to the *West Eastern Divan* Goethe writes, "Eine solche Ehrfurcht vor allem was den Menschen Natürliches umgibt, leitet auf alle bürgerlichen Tugenden: Aufmerksamkeit, Reinlichkeit, Fleiss wird angeregt und genährt" (176; "A similar reverence with regard to the nature encompassing mankind has been conveyed to bourgeois virtues: attentiveness, cleanliness, diligence are encouraged and nurtured" [my translation]).

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