

Framing Pictures, Transcending Marks: Walter Benjamin's 'On Paintings, Signs and Marks'

Andrew Benjamin

“Experience is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge.”

Walter Benjamin

Opening

Initial access to Benjamin's early writings on painting is provided by a letter to Scholem written on the 22nd October 1917.¹ Benjamin's letter was written in response to an earlier one in which Scholem outlined an approach to Cubism (Benjamin refers to the now lost letter as '*Ihren Brief über Kubismus*'). For Scholem that approach was clearly intended to have greater extension (Benjamin 1995: 388-396). Benjamin is responding to a philosophy of painting sketched by Scholem and which would generate an account of all specific types of painting. Scholem's formal analysis using notions of line, colour and their subsequent combination is insufficient for Benjamin. An insufficiency arising, not just for formal reasons but because the elements that were given as an attempt to address art misunderstood the relationship between the internal world of painting and externality. The latter, externality, is described by Benjamin in the letter as the painting's "sensuous object" (*sinnlichen Gegenstände*). Benjamin's response is to suggest that what is needed is to bring painting into the realm of language. Only then would it be possible to deal with particularity. The reference, in the letter, to language and thus to the primacy of the word is intended, as Benjamin makes clear, to evoke his early work on language.² However, it also opens another, though related path, and that is to his Doctoral dissertation on Romantic criticism, and thus to a different conception of the word, namely "prose". Another possible line to pursue therefore is the relationship between language and prose (*'Sprache'* and *'Prosa'*).³ It is essential to hold the register of prose in place.

Evoking language and allowing that evocation to be thought in terms of prose is to link art work to that which provides it with an essential part of its conditions of possibility, namely criticism. Criticism is one way of naming the relation between prose

and art work. Naming – the act – which should be understood within this context as criticism, has a constituting power.⁴ Rather than identifying the process merely as criticism, precisely because criticism will have a constituting power, it can be repositioned as “becoming criticism”. Henceforth, criticism would no longer be there as an addition to art's work. On the contrary it is that through which the object becomes the work of art. What is intended by the expression “becoming criticism” is twofold. Both aspects are related. In the first instance it identifies the object of criticism in terms of an ontology of potentiality. While criticism constitutes the work of art as art, the act of constitution involves pure potentiality. (It is precisely this aspect of the object that will remerge in terms of ‘nameability’ at a later stage.) A pure state that is explicable in terms of an infinite of potential. In relation to pure potentiality any one act of criticism – an act resulting in interpretation – is finitude. The second aspect emerges here precisely because there cannot be an identity let alone a complementarity between pure potentiality and finitude; the finite is itself to be understood therefore as continually becoming; in the sense of the continuity of interpretive acts, each one finite and therefore complete and yet present within a set up that is itself continuous.

Finitude – the act of interpretation – is the interruption of continuity. There is a further sense therefore in which finitude involves the continuity of the discontinuous. Precisely because what is named is at work – art work as an activity rather than an already determined object - the name then cannot just locate the work of art, as though art work was its explicable in terms of mere empirical presence. Were that to be the case then the work would be assumed to be no more than a simple static entity. Contrary to an insistence on stasis, the position that then emerges is that art work is constituted through a specific act of naming. Naming would no longer be the simple identification of the object. Rather naming occurs within and as part of becoming criticism. And yet, this act, precisely because of its differentiation from the medium that it constitutes, breaks art's possible hold on the idiosyncratic. In other words, though at this stage such a claim is no more than a conjecture, the inherently disjunctive relation between art and prose, rather than leading to the work's undoing, is that which allows on the one hand a conjunctive dimension in which the art's work comes to be stated within and as prose, and yet on the

other hand the disjunctive connection holds art's aleatory presence in play by refusing a coextensivity between media thereby allowing art its articulation within that potentiality which occasions interpretation. (Interpretation as finitude.) Art remains – remains what it is in its relation of distance to prose – while simultaneously art comes to be what it is insofar as it allows for the introduction of prose. Moreover, the interplay of distance and relation forestalls the incursion of philosophical idealism by opening up a link between art and writing within which what is staged is art's coming to presence as art – a coming to presence realised within becoming criticism, as opposed to that presence having the Idea (or an Ideal) as its guarantor.

The structural presence of this form of distinction is evident in a range of Benjamin's early writings. In another context, in a short discussion of landscape, he argues that,

if a painter sits in front of a landscape and 'copies' it (as we say) the landscape itself does not occur in the picture; it could best be described as the symbol of its artistic content (GS. VI. 37/SW.1.95).

For Benjamin, the use of the term symbol identifies the distinction between different 'conceptual realms.' What Benjamin is arguing for – and this is an argument which can be read as directed at Kant – is a distinction between what he calls "natural experience" and the experience that is linked to knowledge. The former is the conception of experience that is developed by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* the conditions of possibility for which are established in the 'Transcendental Aesthetic'.⁵ The first is a conception of experience that is articulated within a structure of immediacy, the latter is one that ties knowledge to experience. Within its form will always be that which is becoming determinant, i.e. form as a process of forming rather than an already established and determinant end result. As will be argued the distinction between immediacy and forming, and thus the distancing of immediacy that it occasions is necessary in order to give an account of affect that is linked to knowledge as opposed to an account of affect that takes immediacy as its point of departure. (Here it should be added that if there is a difference between the philosophical position that insists on the

primacy of art work, and it is precisely this position that informs the approach taken in this context to Walter Benjamin, and Benjamin's own, then it resides in a resistance to the link on which Benjamin insists between art and epistemology. In lieu of that link epistemology cedes its place to ontology. While there is a concomitant repositioning of art – a repositioning in which there is a shift in emphasis from meaning to art's workful character – the move to the ontological allows Benjamin's own claims about criticism to acquire a more appropriate philosophical expression.)

Prior to pursuing these possible openings it is essential to stay with Scholem's letter to Benjamin. On one level it would seem that Scholem's evocation of painting's constitutive elements – given in the three-fold division noted above – would open up the possibility of rethinking the hold of generic determinations in favour of the object. The difficulty for Benjamin is that the way this state of affairs is presented assumes an immediate correspondence between internality and externality. If there is a necessity for mediacy then it does not lie simply in the impossibility of immediacy – after all a certain version of the history of the symbol is comprised of such possibilities – on the contrary it lies in the way the object exists. In other words, though to employ a language that is not Walter Benjamin's, and to relate it to the methodological point made above, it lies in the relationship between the ontology of the art object – in this instance painting – and its becoming an object of experience. More is at stake therefore than the mere refusal of the opposition between the inside and the outside.

Here, of course, it is not experience as end in itself, rather it is the experience demanded by art's work. Throughout Benjamin's writings the possibility of experience as such – in part a possibility that is the legacy of a residual Kantian epistemology whose critique, for Benjamin, is a necessary point of departure – gives way to a complex relation in which Benjamin's own reflections, initially on art and then on cultural objects in general, reworks experience both in relation to the object as well as in terms of experience's historical possibility. Moving from a Kantian conception of possibility to one more centrally grounded in Benjamin's work is not just to introduce a historical sense of experience but also to recognize that such a possibility is inextricably bound up with a

reconfiguration of the relationship between knowledge and its object. These concerns create the setting in which to turn to Benjamin's short though demanding text.

The paper in question, 'Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal' ('On Painting or Signs and Marks') was written in 1917.⁶ (II.2. 603-7/SW.1. 83-6) While remaining unpublished during his lifetime it nonetheless provides an important point of focus for any treatment of Benjamin's overall concern with art.⁷ Painting obviously re-emerges as a topic in the famous essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility'. In addition, there is a review of an exhibition of Chinese painting that was held in the Bibliothèque Nationale during Benjamin's stay in Paris.⁸ While Benjamin's ostensible concerns were with the effects of photography references to painting have a sustained presence. In the context of 'On Painting or Signs and Marks' two specific areas of concern are opened up by the text's move to painting. The first, as already intimated, pertains to the way in which language and art come to be connected. The nature of that connection – a connection holding to the particularity of art on the one hand and language on the other – transforms both the relation and its constituent elements. The second element concerns the text's ostensible area of concern. Precisely because the text ends with a discussion of painting – painting as a delimited and specific area – this allows for the more general concern of the relationship between specific art forms and criticism to become the focus of attention rather than either a too generalised description of art, as though specificity were no more than a secondary characteristic, or too hasty a slide between technical innovation and novelty. (The latter, once positioned within a philosophical concern with art, is the conflation of chronological time and the 'now' resulting in the positing of the new. With such a move innovation and experimentation become no more than the banality of the 'new'.)

Benjamin's 'On Painting or Signs and Marks'

While it may yield a task almost as long as this brief work itself, it is nonetheless essential that the detail of its formulations be noted. While emphasis will be given to painting (*Malerei*) it emerges from a consideration of the mark (*Mal*). The text starts by

invoking the ‘realm of signs’. Within it, the ‘line’ has different meanings. These differing possibilities include, ‘the written line’ ‘the graphic line’ and what he refers to as ‘the line of the absolute sign’. The latter form of line is described as ‘magical’. What is meant by this designation will be of fundamental importance. This line is not defined by what it represents. Its magical nature is not given by a relationship between the external and the internal. It is magical ‘as such’ (*als solche*). Here, both the object and its projective quality – its having that quality is, of course, part of its magic – both form part of the object. It is as though the object now has a thickness. No longer the presentation of an outside, it then registers as more than a simple surface. This move to a definition in terms of an ‘absolute’ – an ‘absolute’ as given beyond any simple oscillation between an inside and an outside - will continue to be of real significance. Benjamin does not consider either ‘geometric’ or ‘written’ lines. He moves straight to a discussion of the ‘graphic line’. The importance of this form of line is in how it comes to acquire its identity. Its emergence, in contrast to ‘area’ (*Fläche*), has for Benjamin both metaphysical as well as graphic significance.

The graphic line marks out an area and as such becomes its background. Reciprocally, of course, a graphic line exists in relation to the background though equally in its differentiation from it. Background therefore has a fundamental meaning for ‘drawing’ (*Zeichnung*) because it sustains identity. While the significance graphically of ‘background’ cannot be denied, of equal importance is what Benjamin refers to as the metaphysical dimension. This has to do with the conferring, thus securing, of identity. Benjamin writes that “(T)he graphic line confers an identity on its background” (*Die graphische Linie verleiht ihrem Untergrunde Identität*) (83/604). Of greater significance, especially in relation to the rethinking of the surface is the following comment:

The identity of the background of a drawing is quite different from that of the white surface (*weißer Papierfläche*) on which it is inscribed. We might even deny it that identity by thinking of it as surge of white waves (though these might not even be distinguishable to the naked eye.) (*eventuell mit bloßem Auge nicht unterscheidbarer*) (604/83).

What is of real note in this formulation is that this difference may not be evident to the eye. In other words, despite having a graphic result, it would not have simple graphic presence. Surface is more than a literal surface. Within drawing – thought by Benjamin in terms of “the pure drawing” (*die reine Zeichnung*) – surfaces cannot be reduced to the status of blank white space. A way of understanding what Benjamin means by the metaphysical can be located in the distinction between simple graphic presence and what is not given to the eye. While not expressed in these terms it would be as though the metaphysical came into play at the moment in which mere physical presence was transformed into material presence. (A materialist account, one that allowed for matter to be operative, will hold itself apart from the philosophical problematic of empiricism. The next part of the text is on the ‘absolute sign’ (*das absolute Zeichen*). Its significance lies, in part, in what Benjamin describes as its antithetical relation to ‘the absolute mark’ (*das absolute Mal*). It is in connection to the latter that painting (*Malerei*), almost as a voiced presence, emerges.

Signs have a ‘spatial relation’ and refer to persons. Examples of the ‘absolute sign’ include the ‘sign of Cain’ and the one that the ‘Israelites’ put on their door to ward off the angel of death during the ‘Tenth Plague’. The spatiality of the sign is given by a form of distance. The sign is other than what it signifies. What is signified however is a specific type of person; equally, it has significance for specific persons. Distance therefore has a two-fold dimension. The sign is always doubly other. The antithesis lies in the distance since it introduces a realm of representation. What will identify – on a metaphysical level and thus not just visually – the mark is the closure of this space and thus the compression of the structure of distance that representation demands. Further evidence for this distancing emerges from Benjamin’s description of the sign as ‘printed’ on to something. It can only exist therefore on a surface. The mark on the other hand ‘emerges’. Benjamin goes on to argue that the ‘mark appears on living things’. There is no distinction therefore between its appearing and its being what it is; hence, there cannot be a distinction between the mark and the absolute mark. For Benjamin, ‘the mark is always absolute and resembles nothing else in its manifestation’ (*und ist im Erscheinen nichts anderem ähnlich*). (605/85) Examples of the mark – blushing – not only indicate a

relation to guilt but also can, as in the case of Belshazzar's feast, appear as the 'warning of guilt' and thus as its sign. To that extent the sign and the mark are coterminous. Past and future are elided in this moment. Not only is this the province of G-d, it also indicates that extent to which there endures a magical quality. He then adds – and this will serve as the introduction of painting (*Malerei*) – that this temporal simultaneity, and its 'meaning', do not delimit 'the medium of the mark' (*das Medium des Mals*). (604/85)

The delimitation of meaning – its limit as the point of orientation – is the opening to painting. What has emerged with the mark, indeed what maybe be said to characterize its presence – and here the characteristic in question is essentially metaphysical – is the mark's self-referential nature. The self-referential has an opening out; an opening already identified in the possible confluence between sign and mark. In the case of the instances given by Benjamin, the example noted above was Belshazzar's feast; it was this movement that brought the mark into the province controlled by G-d. In the case of painting there will be a similar correspondence with the divine. In this instance it will not be the refusal of a distinction between the past and the future – a temporal event that can, for the Benjamin of this early text, only be G-d's province – but the connection between the act of naming and the conferring of identity. The human imitates the divine by naming. Naming becomes a form of creating. Two elements of this formulation will have to be pursued. The first, as was noted at the outset, is that art is constituted. It has therefore neither a natural existence, nor one located within history if history is understood as no more than the continuation of time, chronology as the naturalization of historical time. Art is created by its being named. (The creation has a history.) Its being named as such occurs within and as the act of criticism. Secondly, criticism necessitates that incorporation of this 'higher power'; necessitates it and, to a certain extent, is it.

Benjamin begins his treatment of painting by invoking the distinction, originally drawn in this context by Scholem in his letter, between colour and line. The setting is the opening line in which the 'image/painting' (*das Bild*) is described as having 'no background' (*keinen Untergrund*) (606/85). The absence of this form of ground – clearly as a literal presence - reintroduces what was alluded to earlier as a thickened surface.

Even though the example given is from Raphael, Benjamin's argument that the distinctions of colour within one of his works are not brought about by the use of a 'graphic line,' is an argument with greater extension. It is worth noting Benjamin's actual formulation. He writes that, '(T)he reciprocal demarcations of a coloured surface (composition) (*der Farbeflächen [Komposition]*) of a painting by Raphael are not based on the graphic line' (606/85). To which he then adds that in 'essence' (*Wesen*) compositions of this type have 'nothing to do with the graphic' (*mit Graphic gar nichts zu tun*) (606/85). The significance of the formulation lies, in the first instance, in the identification of the coloured surface with the 'composition'. In the second place, however, it yields a further instance in which the focus of concern becomes the surface. Prior to taking up the above mentioned identification between coloured surface and composition, it is essential to note the refrain of the surface.

The two points that have already been identified are the following. In the first instance, it is that the graphic line attains identity by the way it can be contrasted with a 'surface/area' (*Fläche*). The reciprocity between surface and line is fundamental since the surface is now no longer a simple background. Equally, of course, the graphic line holds itself apart from a simple surface. It forms its own surface in marking it out. In sum, therefore, the surface – not the literal surface but the essential surface – is a construct of art's work. The second point stems from the argument, already cited, in which Benjamin differentiates between "(T)he identity the background of a drawing has" (*Die Identität, welche Untergrund einer Zeichnung hat*) (606/85) and its inscription on a 'white surface' (*weißer Papierfläche*). Both of these moves are, to use Benjamin's terminology, 'metaphysical'. They work beyond the hold of the eye insofar as they cannot be equated with literal presence. In addition, they are preparatory to any more direct approach painting. (Painting as art work.) They clear the way by allowing the concepts proper to an account of painting to emerge.

What is opened up here is a concern with the surface that works beyond any reduction to literal presence. (Hence, there is an accord with what was identified earlier as a 'thickened surface'.) Now there is the 'coloured surface' i.e. the composition itself.

What is for Benjamin ‘astonishing’ about this state of affairs is that a composition cannot be equated with the ‘graphic’. Moreover, a composition – remembering of course the reciprocity, if not identity, between composition and ‘coloured surface’ – is not an ‘illusion’ (*Schein*). In other words, it is neither semblance nor mere appearance. What then is it that appears? The image (*Bild*) comprises more than an organized collection of marks. (Hence, in more general terms, an image is the result of technique, marks the result of the technical.) The proof of this proposition resides, for Benjamin, in the negative supposition, namely if it were only marks then the ‘composition would be ‘impossible to name’ (*zu benennen*). Two points therefore. The first is that a picture can be described such that it is no more than marks. And yet, secondly, there is something else. The ‘picture’ (*Bild*) is linked to ‘something that it is not’ (*auf etwas das es nicht selbst ist*) (606/85). What this ‘something’ is, is given within naming. This other element is language. (Identified earlier as prose and thus as writing.) The composition – the coloured surface – transcends any reduction to marks, it overcomes the marks themselves – overcoming by incorporating them.

Composition creates the possibility of naming. (A point that will acquire greater clarity in the later discussion of Rembrandt’s *The Feast of Belshazzar*.) What is introduced is a ‘higher power’ (*einer höhern Macht*) (606/85). Prior to taking up the question of how this power is to be understood, the nature of its presence needs to be noted. This power is neutral. Placed within the mark it resides there without threatening the mark (*Mal*). While not the same it inhabits the mark because it is ‘related’ to it. After presenting these moves, clarifications that situate this ‘power’, Benjamin then defines it. Within this definition what is introduced is the constituting force of naming. As has been indicated, within the name – naming as process – prose comes to be fundamental to art work.

This power is the linguistic word, which lodges in the medium of the language of painting, invisible as such and revealing itself only in the composition. The picture is named after the composition. (*Das Bild wird nach der Komposition benannt*) (607/86).

The marks and the overall composition bear the name. The painting comes to be what it is through the act of naming. And yet, it is not as though any work can be named – or merely named, if naming is no more than identifying – hence, the need to distinguish, radically, between the formal presence of graphic lines and ‘composition’. (Graphic lines, in the end, are inextricably tied up with immediacy and thus with a certain conception of aesthetics as opposed to a philosophy of art) This allows for an understanding of the history of painting that is no longer bound by iconography but by the relation between the mark and word. The question then is how is the presence of ‘word’ to be understood. What conditions the introduction of prose? There are two aspects involved in answering this question. The first pertains to necessity, what can be described as the necessity of the work to be named. Composition coming into its own through the transcendence of the mark, or at least through the transcendence of the reduction of the mark to its literal presence, a move effected by the act of naming. The second is a claim; *in extremis* a right. These two elements are brought together directly following the point noted above that the ‘picture/image’ (*Bild*) is named after the composition.

From what has been said it is self-evident that marks and composition are the elements of every picture (*jedes Bildes*) that makes a claim to be named. (a claim on ‘nameability’ [*Benennbarkeit*]). The picture that does not do this would cease to be one and would therefore enter into the realm of the mark as such; but this is something that we cannot imagine (*keine Vorstellung machen können*) (607/86).

Central to this formulation is the argument that ‘pictures’ make a claim on being named, where that claim pertains to a quality of the composition rather than naming as an arbitrary designation. In order to make this position consistent with the one developed by Benjamin in relation to translation and language, the argument needs to be that ‘nameability’ is a quality of the ‘picture’ in precisely the same way as ‘translatability’ is a quality of language. Translatability is that which allows for translation. Benjamin formulates this position in the following terms:

Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original contained in the issue of translatability (*Übersetzbarkeit*). (GS. IV.1.9/SW. 1.254)

‘Translatability’ as a quality therefore involves at the minimum that which inheres in the original, not however as a literal presence but as a potentiality. The precondition is that this quality cannot be reduced to literal presence if by the latter what is understood is a conception of meaning that can be equated with ostensive definition. Translation is then the actualization of a work’s potentiality. Translatability is that which allows for a work to live on through the discontinuous continuity of its being translated. Translatability allows a work to have ‘afterlife’. The connection to nameability emerges at this precise point. The continuity of the work’s being named – a possibility allowed for by the work – is, again, the discontinuous continuity of its presence as an object within criticism. It must always be discontinuous. Continuity would be the end of the work’s life. That end, whether it appear in the guise of the reduction of criticism to the interpretive equivalent to ostensive definition or the incorporation of criticism within a theory of truth (the truth of epistemology as opposed to the truth of ontology), is precluded because of the ontological preconditions for ‘nameability’. That precondition, one equally at work within ‘translatability’, is potentiality. Potentiality allows for criticism. Criticism releases a work’s potentiality. The release occurs within the interplay of continuity and discontinuity that, in this instance, defines the relationship between art and prose.

Rembrandt’s Absolute Mark

A way of taking up this relationship is to return to the example given by Benjamin, namely the reference to Belshazzar’s feast. Benjamin, as was noted, is clearly referring to the *Book of Daniel* (5. 1-30). In painting, within the medium’s own history, the reference could have been made more precise; namely, it would have been to Rembrandt’s painting *The Feast of Belshazzar*. Here this ‘event’ is staged pictorially. Perhaps, it could be argued that what is staged is its painting.

The words written by the divine hand are there to be read. They warn of an impending disaster. Neither standing for it nor symbolizing it. They are that warning. Within the painting Belshazzar is surrounded by treasures taken from the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem. It is as though there is an important shift in temporal stature.

The future is not present as a possibility. Its actuality is stated. The reign of the Babylonian kings is at an end. The work of time has a greater exigency, exerting a more demanding hold, due to the complex temporality occasioned by the presence of the hand that writes. In order that this point is developed the painting is central.

Within the painting wine pours from a goblet. Beneath the wine is the outstretched hand of the servant. Above that hand Belshazzar's hand and arm frame the words written by the hand that appears. The hand that writes. Lines of hands having been drawn in parallel. It is as if the surface contained four parallel lines marking the place where arms and hands would come to be placed. Perhaps they were marked out in advance. Even if they were in the work, now as becoming art work and as such transcending marks, there is a different form of presence. The question therefore concerns this transcendence; a transcendence that has its essential corollary in the re-emergence of the mark as the site of technique. (A site given by the mark having been attributed an operative quality rather than a representational one.)

The narrative of the *Book of Daniel*, or at least the appropriate verses – need to located in (and as) the painting. Invited to the Babylonian court because of his interpretive powers, Daniel came to occupy a unique position. Unique in that context though in the end it is a position that opens up to a type of generalization. Belshazzar surrounded himself with seers. The task was to interpret signs. Daniel, who displayed exceptional skills when it came to the interpretation of dreams – dreams and signs were themselves domains in which both interpretational conflicts and limits could be played out – was already positioned at a distance from the court. Within this setting – the court feasting – a disembodied hand appears. Appearing and writing are coterminous. They exist in, and as, the instant. While the writing is taking place – a taking place the registration of which is, in part, the painting's work – the wine goblet is overturned. The wine captured at the moment of its being spilt defines the instant. And yet, as the goblet is overturned at the moment – and it is that moment, moment as the instant, since the wine is yet to leave fully the goblet and thus still to land on the carpeted floor – the final letter is being written. (While it is interesting to note that Rembrandt has misunderstood

the source and confused two Aramaic letters – i.e. the *zayin* with the final *nun* – as yet this does not impede the establishing of the instant.) Nonetheless, what must be questioned is what is being written. A question that, as will be suggested, turns around the relationship between writing and time. (However, not writing and time in the abstract. What occurs is their presence as painting.) As the absolute mark what is being written resists, or should, its incorporation into the structured oppositions that identify either the symbol or the sign. Hence the questions: Who reads? What is the experience of knowledge? Note that these questions arise from the particularity of the painting.

The letters themselves can be read. Being read is, of course, their transformation from mere marks to words, in a sense their prosaic transformation. However, they cannot be read if the reading conventions of either Aramaic or Hebrew are followed – i.e. reading right to left. Nor can they be read if the convention is simply reversed; i.e. reading from left to right. The problem of reading these letters becomes therefore the already inscribed presence of the move from immediacy to the conjoining of knowledge and experience. They cannot be read immediately. Moreover, that is true both in terms of immediacy as a temporal term thus equated with the temporality of the instant, and in regards to the suggested absence of the conceptual. Overcoming the instant is the allowing of knowledge, the introduction of which is predicated upon the space opened by the process of criticism. Criticism becomes knowledge. (While the point will be made again, it should nonetheless be noted that the opening in question could not be simply posited. It has to be located within the work. The process of its being located is inextricably bound up with what has emerged thus far in terms of naming and criticism.)

The letters in the painting can only be read if they are approached from the right and the read vertically. The source of the transformation is Menasseh ben Israel's *De Termina Vitae* (1639),⁹ a text that repeats the ordering suggested by both the Talmud and the Midrash. That suggestion was itself advanced in order to account both for the Babylonian's lack of comprehension as well as Daniel's ability. The inability to decipher the letters – the impossibility, that is, of their immediate comprehension – would have been a state of affairs in which the letters would have come to have been equated with

their graphic presence. The overcoming of that twofold position means that not only are the letters no longer identified with their literal presence, at the same time there would have been a transformation of that presence on the part of Daniel. As such, the marks were subject to another act of constitution. The marks were able to be named by allowing them to become prose, a becoming in which initially they literally became prose, though they became prose because of a response to an object that demands to be named – a call for naming. Thus occurring as a response to the necessity for naming inherent in art's work.

What needs to be noted is the consequence of that transformation of the temporality of the instant. To begin with the instant has to be understood as pure immediacy: immediacy as the now of a happening. Immediacy is not literalized since immediacy must be literal: i.e. unmediated. In the painting the instant is the wine falling from the goblet. Paint captures, holds and thus presents that moment. It is presented as the instant. Perhaps its presentation occurs in an instant. And yet, what of the moment after – the moment after the instant but within the work? It is as though in the evocation of the instant as a moment the painting announces another one. It is both the force, though more exactly the actual possibility of another moment, one occurring after but still within the work, that shatters the hold of the instant. (It is as though it enacts the shattering of the conventions of the line in which it was trapped between the sign and the literal.) However, the question of the further moment, an addition that still forms part of the original (thereby defining the original as a site at work, working within its becoming art) would be merely speculative if it could not be given material presence. What is presented materially is not just a site that has to become prose, more is in play.

The question of the additional moment – an after-effect that defines a complex origin – is not an invented addition. It can be located in the presence of Balthazar's arm. His arm in framing the words not only identifies the locus of the disembodied hand, it causes the move between the four hands – the parallel lines – to mark, within the same space, different spatial-temporal locations. They can be held together visually only if the instant is privileged. The overcoming of the instant is not its denial – rather it is its

inclusion into a larger economy. What that means in this context is not allowing the falling wine to define the temporality of the painting's comprehension while, of course, holding the wine within the painting now positioned within becoming criticism. That economy, however, while demanding prose – demanding that a work incorporates the complex presence of the interplay of identity and language – brings with it something other than the reduction of the work to a literary narrative. While the complication of the site of origination demands prose there will always be a found(er)ing and disjunctive relation between the site that makes a claim to naming and the process of criticism. In other words, even though there is the demand to be named, the inherent disjunction between prose and art work – a disjunction sustained ontologically by the distinction between potentiality and finitude – allows, as was noted earlier, a work its afterlife.

In sum, it is the move away both from the temporality of the instant and thus also away from the insistence within aesthetics on immediacy that opens up painting. Here it occurs because of having to hold together that which cannot be defined by the instant. What occurs is an opening and thus an opening up which is art's work. This reframes the point already noted by Benjamin that art is connected 'to something it is not'. To which it should be added that it is precisely that link that allows art to come into its own. What is allowed for by that opening, and which occasions it, is criticism. The content of criticism pertains to how the relation between the instant and that which could never occur immediately – i.e. knowing both how to read what is being written and thus working through their consequences. The opening up – an opening in which it becomes possible to locate knowledge – is allowed for by the ontology of art's work defined in terms of potentiality and criticism as the occasioning of art's relation to prose.

Works Cited

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Walter Benjamin (1991): *Gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser. Suhrkamp. Frankfurt am main. 1980-1991.

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Notes

¹ All references to Walter Benjamin texts are to both the German edition and the relevant English translation; page numbers will be given in the text. In the case of the German reference will be to the *Gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser. Suhrkamp. Frankfurt am Main. 1980-1991. In regard to the English, reference for the most part will be made to the *Selected Writings*. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Harvard University Press. 1996-2003. They will be noted as GS and SW respectively followed by the volume and the page number.

² The first major instance of that work is the paper. 'On Language as such and on the Language of Man'. (GS. II.1 140-57. SW.1 62-75.) I have offered an interpretation of this paper in my *Philosophy's Literature*. Clinamen Press. Manchester 2001.

³ The following discussion of prose needs to be interpreted as an attempt to take up and the work through Benjamin's treatment of prose in 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism'. (GS.I.1. Pages11-122. SW.117-200 (in particular pages 100-109/172-178) In sum the argument is that prose (in the guise of criticism) rather than leading to the work's dissolution is that which allows the art's work an afterlife.

⁴ I have developed aspects of this argument in my 'Literary Potential. The Release of Criticism'. In David Rudrum (editor) *Philosophy and Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2005.

⁵ Benjamin's relation to Kant raises a series of complex questions. Two paths need to be pursued. The first is Benjamin's explicit confrontation with Kant in a range of early papers. The second is to trace an implicit distancing of Kantianism through Benjamin's continual engagement with 'experience'. The allusion to Kant in this paper forms part of this second approach. In sum, the argument is that what the 'Transcendental Aesthetic' cannot take into consideration is the necessary historicity of experience and the complex subject positions that experience necessitates within modernity. The retention of Kantianism has to be understood as bound up the retained effective presence of immediacy. The critique both of Kantian aesthetic theory (as is evidenced, for example, in the conception of Beauty in *The Critique of Judgment*) and the 'transcendental aesthetic' in *The Critique of Pure Reason* forms a fundamental part of the development of a philosophy of art. The latter demanding a reconceptualization of the ontology of the art work as opposed to locating that work within a subject's immediate experience of an object. (The latter comprises aesthetics *par excellence*.)

⁶ One of the most sustained recent discussions of this paper occurs in the context of an important examination of the relationship between Benjamin and Carl Einstein. See Charles W. Haxthausen. 'Reproduction/Repetition:Walter Benjamin/Carl Einstein'. *October* 107. Winter 2004, in particular pages 63-68.

⁷ 'Über die Malerie oder Zeichen und Mal', in GS.II.2 Pages 603-609. *SW*.1. Pages 83-86. There are, in addition, a series of early unpublished papers that touch equally on the

concerns of painting and colour. They can, for the most part be found in *GS VI*. Pages 109-129. Howard Caygill has incorporated this paper into the development of his more general interpretation of Benjamin, which is based in part on reading these early papers as part of a sustained encounter with Kant. (See, *The Colour of Experience*. Routledge. London 2001.) While the path that Caygill opens, insofar as it concerns Kant, is undoubtedly correct, whether the retention of an opposition between the transcendental and the speculative is the most productive way of reading Benjamin is a topic too vast to be pursued in detail here. The project in this instance involves staying with the detail of the paper itself and to allow that detail to open up concerns that move in a direction other than the provision of an overall account of Benjamin's project.

⁸ 'Peintures Chinoises à la Bibliothèque Nationale'. *GS IV*. 1.2. pages 601-605.

⁹ For an important discussion of the relationship between Rembrandt and Manasseh ben Israel in which there is a discussion of Belshazzar's Feast see Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt. Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam*. University of California Press. 2002. Pages 59-72. The preceding discussion of the painting draws on Zell's analysis. However the implications advanced are different.