

Toward a Politics of Compassion^①

Samuel Weber

Abstract: The feelings of isolation and uncertainty experienced during the Covid - 19 pandemic may refer us back to two historical accounts of the plague: the ancient one in Athens described and discussed by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*; and the Black Death that ravaged Florence in 1349, giving rise to Boccaccio's masterpiece, *The Decameron*. In them, a political model of hasty decision and discourse (in terms of judgement and action) is contrasted with a literary model that valorizes the working of time and space in the reflection of events. Benjamin's critique of the "expansive tendency" in pseudo effective political discourse and Derrida's emphasis on the "feeling" for and with the animals provide a double theoretical ground for further understanding Boccaccio's "frictional" storytelling, setting the affective and the singular experience at the heart of what can be called a "politics of compassion."

Keywords: plague, frictionality, compassion, *dem Wort Versagte*

Author: Samuel Weber is the Avalon Foundation Professor of Humanities and co-director of the Paris Program in Critical Theory at Northwestern University. One of the leading thinkers across the disciplines of literary theory, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, his most recent publications include *Singularity: Politics and Poetics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021) and *Preexisting Conditions: Recounting the Plague* (Zone Books, 2022). Email: S-weber@northwestern.edu. Address: Department of German, Kresge Centennial Hall, Room 3 - 335, Northwestern University, 1880 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208, United States.

标 题:走向同情的政治

摘 要:在新冠疫情期间所经历的孤独感和不确定性使我们回想起两个关于瘟疫的历史叙述:修昔底德在他的《伯罗奔尼撒战争史》中关于古代雅典瘟疫的描绘,以及薄伽丘在他的杰作《十日谈》中提到的引发此书写作的背景,即1349年席卷佛罗伦萨的黑死病。在这两种叙述中,一种由仓促的决定和自信的话语构成的政治模式与一种文学模式形成了对比,这种文学模式重视时间和空间在对事件的判断中所起的作用。本雅明对伪有效政治话语中的“扩张性倾向”的批判,以及德里达对动物的“感觉”的强调,为进一步理解薄伽丘的“摩擦”叙事提供了双重理论基础,并将情感和独异体验置于“同情的政治”的核心地位。

关键词:瘟疫; 摩擦性; 同情; 言不可达

作者简介:塞缪尔·韦伯是美国西北大学阿瓦隆基金人文学科教授及该校巴黎批判理论项目的联合主任,当代文学理论、欧洲哲学和精神分析等领域的知名学者。他的新作包括 *Singularity: Politics and Poetics* (明尼苏达大学出版社,2021年)和 *Preexisting Conditions: Recounting the Plague* (区域图书出版社,2022年)。邮箱:S-weber@northwestern.edu。地址:Department of German, Kresge Centennial Hall, Room 3 - 335, Northwestern University, 1880 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208, United States.

My idea of a matter-of-fact and yet highly political style of writing is: To lead up to that which is denied the word.
(*Mein Begriff sachlichen und zugleich hoch politischen Stils und Schreibens ist: Hinzuführen auf das dem Wort versagte*)

Walter Benjamin, "Letter to Martin Buber," 1917

It is a banality and a truism, and yet perhaps still necessary to recall that to reflect on the time to come requires reflection on the time that has passed and that continues to impact the time we are living through today. This is particularly true concerning the experiences most of us have had with Covid – 19. Historically considered, these experiences, however varied, are very different from the ones that characterize previous encounters with pestilences, particularly on a worldwide scale. But it is precisely such differences that can help us to bring what is new in our recent experience of the current plague better into focus, and thus in helping us anticipate how to prepare for the future.

The first and most obvious difference has to do with the intensity of the affliction. Previous plagues tended to be much more quickly lethal than has been the case with Covid – 19. I use the word “tended” here advisedly, because I will not be able to consider all previous plagues but in fact only one or two at most, which have given rise to remarkable written accounts. I am thinking first of the plague that visited Athens around 430 BCE, and which is described and discussed by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*; and second, of the plague that ravaged Florence in the middle of the 14th century (1349) and that gave rise to one of the great works of narrative literature, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. In both of these instances, the plague killed its victims rapidly and there was little anyone could do about it.

In the case of Covid – 19, the working of the virus was more subtle: it did not kill immediately, nor did it kill everyone who suffered from it. There was a latency period, during which time the person afflicted could infect others without necessarily developing any symptoms. This, together with contemporary means of transportation in a globally networked world, guaranteed that the epidemic would quickly become a pandemic, something that did not happen with the same rapidity in the case of previous plagues. Also, the total lack of knowledge that Thucydides describes as rendering helpless the efforts of physicians to control or heal the illness did not obtain in the case of Covid – 19. Although the specific SARS virus that causes Covid – 19 was previously unknown, the “family” to which it belongs was not, and this, together with modern technologies such as genetic sequencing, allowed vaccines to be developed within less than a year, with a speed and efficacy that had hitherto been undreamed of. Nevertheless, by this time the virus had spread worldwide, and this has allowed for mutations to occur that may or may not question the effectiveness of existing vaccines to prevent or control the illness. The delayed-action aspect of Covid – 19 is also manifest in what is now known as “long Covid” — the long and still largely unknown after-effects of this infection, the intensity or gravity of which may or may not be related to the severity of the symptoms previously manifest. Finally, the long-term effects of the pandemic on economic and social activity add to the uncertainty. The “recovery” much vaunted at the time of this writing can hardly obscure the ravages that the two previous years have produced on the economy: shuttered storefronts give mute testimony to what may be a long-lasting economic contraction of retailing, which, even before the onset of the pandemic, saw the internet mammoth Amazon supplanting large and small department stores. Attempts to control the circulation of the virus accentuate the already substantial loss of confidence in established governmental institutions that has accompanied the development of finance capitalism over the past decades, producing economic inequality of the likes not seen since the early 1930s. In the public health sector, Government spending so far has largely gone to short-term solutions rather than toward addressing long-term structural deficiencies that have been exposed by the effects of the pandemic (Baker and Ivory). The direct effects produced by Covid – 19 thus have to be considered against the background of the growing disaffection of ever larger segments of the population with regard to constituted authorities, democratic or other. Increasing political polarization accompanied by a growing tendency to tolerate or practice violence is, in the United States at least, raised to new heights by the winner-take-all mentality that is inscribed in the two-party electoral system and that is reinforced by the prestige accorded professional sports. But perhaps the

most powerful factor in the spread of this mentality is the growing control of wealth over all aspects of society, from the electoral system to university education and research. More than ever in recent memory at least, “developed Western” societies are becoming or have become “plutocracies,” with increasing indifference to the general welfare. This is nothing new, but it is taking forms that call into question the very conditions that enable societies to survive and function. It is nothing new because what is ultimately at stake is the struggle between two classical ideals and values: that of the autonomous individual on the one hand, and that of collective interdependence on the other, with the weight shifting radically in favor of the former. This shift is not just compatible with populism and critique of “elites” — it thrives on it. If we are called upon today in this conference to reflect not just on “living with Covid” but on what this implies for the future, we must, I submit, reflect on the long tradition that privileges private interest over public welfare, even while proclaiming a convergence of the two. I propose therefore to review very briefly two classical accounts of the experience of plagues, in the hope that they might help us to envisage a future that might provide contract some of the self-destructive tendencies that increasingly dominate the world today.

I. Thucydides

In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides describes the havoc wreaked by the plague that broke out in Athens around 430 BCE and of which himself was a victim, although he survived. As terrible as it was, this plague was not as lethal as the Bubonic Plague of the European middle-ages: the consensus today is that it was probably typhus (“The Plague of Athens”). It was however bad enough to take the life of the leader of Athens, Pericles, along with some 100,000 other Athenians. In part it was Pericles’ preparation for the war with the Spartans that contributed to the destructive force of the epidemic: he had ordered the rural population to relocate within the city walls in order to better protect them. The resulting population density however promoted the spread of the epidemic. In view of the urbanization of populations that has taken place over the past few centuries, similar conditions prevail today, except now on a worldwide scale. Here there is surely one important lesson for the future, although as always, the learning of such lessons will mean little if the existing predominance of private, short-range interest over shared longer-term welfare is not radically altered.

To return to Thucydides: another less tangible factor was perhaps no less devastating in the effects caused by the plague. It was overconfidence, or what the Greeks called *hubris*. The state of mind of the Athenians made it difficult for them to respond effectively to the pandemic. At first, Thucydides recounts, the Athenians believed that “the Peloponnesians had poisoned the wells” (2:48) as part of their war effort. In short, then as now, the first response to danger was and is to seek a scapegoat, a culprit. It is also the response of King Oedipus to the plague in Sophocles’ play, where it turns out to be deeply destructive. But it is also deeply *instructive*: Oedipus fails to imagine “internal” causes of and remedies for the epidemic ravaging Thebes. He seeks to find the cause in others, rather than in himself. The Athenians start out by doing the same. Gradually however they come to realize that in this particular situation it was not the enemy who was to blame. But this discovery in no way leads them to critically examine their own attitudes and traditions. In his first funeral oration, Pericles lauds the Athenians for their unique ability to “meet danger voluntarily” and to “take risks and estimate them beforehand” (2:39–40). Following military setbacks and the devastation wrought by the plague, Pericles is subsequently forced to acknowledge how little prepared the Athenians were to meet a danger that revealed itself to be “something quite different from ordinary diseases.” Such singularity of the plague is especially terrifying to the Athenians, since it calls into question precisely what they thought they could do: namely, to “take risks and estimate them beforehand.” The Athenians are all the more disarmed by the

plague, which is “quite different” from anything they had known, for their having believed that they could deal with anything the future might bring. They find themselves unable “to reflect on the time to come” precisely to the extent that they had previously believed themselves fully capable of doing just that.

Thucydides, who was not just a historian but also a writer, was sensitive to the way in which language participated in this dilemma. “To fit in with the change of events, words too had to change their usual meanings” (3:82). The nature of this change is anything but arbitrary:

What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage . . . to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward. . . . Ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man. . . . To plot successfully was a sign of intelligence, but it was still cleverer to see that a plot was hatching. (3:82)

What Thucydides’ various examples all suggest is that under the pressure of anxiety before the unknown or the unfamiliar — the plague — the general response is often to try to reduce or eliminate the gap separating words from meanings, speech from action. It is as if time, having suddenly become a dangerous medium of the unforeseeable, had to be reduced or eliminated entirely: to think is to act, to think of the future as different from the present and therefore as requiring one to wait and reconsider, the sign of a coward. Above all “to understand a question from all sides” was to exclude one from acting altogether.

All of this presupposes that one is fully in control of a present and a past that one then seeks desperately to project onto the future. And yet, far from accommodating the “change of events,” words fail: “Words indeed fail when one tries to give a general picture of the disease” (2:153). The disease defies generalities, and therefore a certain comprehension. Very different from war, with a clearly discernible enemy, the plague kills and disables without rhyme or reason, and above all without permitting any effective defense. The visitation of the plague is not like a battle or siege in a war: it is a slaughter that demonstrates the limitations of human planning and foresight. But it also demonstrates the superiority of those who can react flexibly without remaining blocked by their previous plans. Thus, “the Peloponnesians left Attica earlier than they had intended because they were afraid of the infection” (2:57). They were thus spared the brunt of the plague, precisely because they did as Pericles scorned them for doing: “When they (the Peloponnesians) stop to think, they begin to fear” (2:147). They acknowledge their fear and act on it, not by rushing forward as does Pericles, in seeking to continue military operations during the plague, with disastrous results (2:58), but rather by withdrawing and thus preserving their armies for future struggles. The Spartan King, Archidamus, “a man who had a reputation for both intelligence and moderation” (1:82), describes the Spartan relation to others in a way almost diametrically opposed to that of Pericles’ describing the Athenians:

We are taught that there is not a great deal of difference between the way we think and the way others think, and that it is impossible to calculate accurately events that are determined by chance. The practical measures we take are always based on the assumption that our enemies are not unintelligent. (1:84)

Although Archidamus does not succeed in his effort to convince the Spartans not to go to war with Athens immediately, but rather to wait until they are better prepared, his words nevertheless testify to a different state of mind in Sparta from that displayed by Pericles in his speeches. Taking into account what might constitute

the most propitious preconditions and most effective preparation for a military conflict — and more generally, for unpredictable events such as plagues — means precisely not trying to reduce the temporal and spatial gap between language, thought and action, even if such reduction can bring a temporary relief from the anxiety before the unknown.

It is thus one thing to take time, to allow time and space for reflection, for allowing that consideration “of an action from all sides” might be the necessary condition of effective “action” rather than an obstacle to it; and it is quite another to rush precipitously into a course of action without having considered all the variables involved.

Such precipitation, the rush to judgment, is what valorizes the attitude that Thucydides, as we have seen, condemns: “To plot successfully was a sign of intelligence, but it was still cleverer to see that a plot was hatching” (3:82). To plot successively is once again to neutralize the discontinuities and interruptions that time, as the medium of unpredictability, brings with it. But to recognize plotting is even better, since it seems to confirm a world in which human reason and intention can effectively reduce its separation from action and impose its own reality on the world. To recognize plotting in this sense, and as Thucydides describes it, is to assert the power of self-consciousness to control the future, and with it the world. And it is precisely this attitude that renders the Athenians all the more vulnerable to the ravages of the plague.

II. Boccaccio's *Decameron*

The desperate attempt of Athenian self-consciousness to assert itself in the face of the utterly singular and uncontrollable plague leads them to weave plots and even better to discern them at work everywhere. How comforting it would be to identify the plague as the result of a “plot” or a conspiracy, as the Athenians at first tried to do. Comforting, because its ravages could then be “understood” as the work of an intelligence, like our own self-consciousness, seeking to accomplish its ends and thus to control its future. The randomness of the plague, by contrast, is disconcerting to the extent that it questions the ability of human intelligence ultimately to protect against mortality. In other words, to “save” living beings from their fate.

A very different response from that of the Athenians is to be found in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Written in the middle of the 14th century (1349 – 1353), the text presents a series of stories told over ten days and night by persons who have left Florence in the throes of a plague that will kill almost half of its population. The group has escaped to the countryside in order to share a common life and to tell each other stories in an agreeable, indeed idyllic setting. The gap between reality and fiction, between intention and accomplishment, thus seems to have been bridged by the success of their exit from a city being ravaged by the plague. But this bridging takes place in a very different way from that described by Thucydides. Florence is not Athens, there is no war and also no political decision-makers. There is just a city — a very important one although not the seat of an empire — that is being decimated by the plague.

This raises the question of just why Boccaccio should have chosen this setting in order to present his stories, which do not relate directly to the disease. The author acknowledges this question in his first address to his prospective readers, considered to be mostly women:

Most gracious ladies, whenever I contemplate how compassionate you all are by nature, I recognize that, in your judgment, the present work will seem both somber and painful, for its opening contains the sad record of the recent, deadly plague. . . . But . . . without recalling these events, I could not explain the origins of the things you will read about later on, I have been forced by necessity to write it all down. (Boccaccio 5)

What is the necessity that compels Boccaccio to use the plague as the frame for his stories? The word “compassionate” in his address to his female readers seems to indicate a possible response. For Boccaccio goes on to recount how his own life was “saved” by the compassion of his friends:

It is a matter of humanity to show compassion for those who suffer, and although it is fitting for everyone to do so, it is especially desirable in those who, having had need of comfort, have received it from others — and if anyone ever needed it or appreciated it or derived any pleasure from it, I am one of them. . . . While I was suffering, the pleasant conversation and invaluable consolation certain friends provided gave me such relief that I am absolutely convinced they are the reason I did not die. . . . I have not forgotten the benefits I once received from those who . . . shared my heavy burden nor will this memory ever fade in me, I truly believe, until I myself am dead. (3)

The only problem with this “explanation” is that the stories that are recounted in *The Decameron* generally seem as remote from compassion as from the plague. The question thus remains unanswered, at least explicitly. But perhaps not implicitly.^②

In recounting stories that bear no direct relationship to plague-ridden Florence, which according to most estimates would lose up to 80% of its population to the disease, *The Decameron* at the same time recounts the formation of a community that is clearly fictional, since it is far removed from the actual reality of the times. Nevertheless, without denying this distance from reality, I would prefer to designate its status as “frictional” rather than as “fictional.” To be sure the men and women represented in the text probably never existed as such — they are products of the stories they tell and of the situations in which they recount them. But these circumstances are not purely “fictional,” especially if by that word is meant something is defined by opposition to “reality.” For what is called “fiction” has its own “reality,” and here that reality is inseparable from the textual narrative that joins and separates readers from that about which they read. For this reason, I prefer to call this text, as many others, not fictional but *frictional*. It takes names that designate objects that existed before and after the text, such as the Church of Santa-Maria Novella; but by inscribing them in what is clearly a narrative of things that as such never existed, it endows them with a significance that exceeds the simple reality of a name that refers to an existing Church. Rather, it gives this word a significance that exceeds its referential content. The Church of Santa Maria Novella signifies something *new and novel*, and which moreover refers to the very literary form that will be paraded through *The Decameron*: that of the *novella*.

I understand frictional signifiers as functioning somewhat along the same lines as those described by Freud with respect to dreams. The dream takes elements from one’s waking experience — “*Tagesreste*,” he calls them in German, literally: “remains of the day” — and invests them with a significance, usually “overdetermined,” very different from the one that is familiar to us from our daily waking lives. The frictional dimension here however suggests that the conventional meaning of words prior to their reinscription in *The Decameron* remains active as it were, demarcating more precisely just what is “novel” in the novellas by relating it to what preexisted it — here the Christian hope of salvation. In short, the institutional basis of the Christian community has now not simply been eliminated but rather *displaced*; out of this displacement emerges the frictional literary community that the ten storytellers agree to establish and as part of which they tell their stories.

Restrictions of time and space compel me to limit my discussion of such “frictionality” to a single story. But it is not any story, since it is the first one told in *The Decameron*, by Panfilo (literally: lover of all). It is the story of one “Ser Cepparello,” who is described as probably the “worst man who had ever been born” (Boccaccio 20). This “Ser Cepparello” is able to sufficiently deceive a friar who has come to take his

confession on his deathbed, so that after his death he is considered to be a saintly character and indeed known then as “Saint Ciappelletto.” You may have noticed that already in the brief summary of the story that precedes its actual recounting in the text, the name of the protagonist as changed from “Ser Cepparello” to “Saint Ciappelletto.” The reason for this is twofold. First, it has to do with the difference of languages, between the Italian and the French:

Because the man was small of stature and dressed like a dandy, the French, not knowing what “Cepparello” signified and thinking it meant “hat,” that is “garland,” in their language, called him, because he was small as we have said, not Ciappello, but Ciappelletto. And so, he was called Ciappelletto everywhere, while only a select few knew he was really Ser Cepparello. (Boccaccio 19 – 20)

Thus, as the translator and editor, Wayne Rebhorn, notes,

The French-speaking Burgundians mistake his name, thinking it sounds like their word for “hat” or “garland,” *chapelet*, and transform it into the half-French, half-Italian Ciappelletto, or Little Garland. In the course of the 14th century, *chapelet* also acquired the meaning of “rosary,” so his name could also mean Little Rosary (20, note 4).

Without going into the many fascinating details of this story, I have to jump to its conclusion, where the narrator, Panfilo, ponders the fact that such a sinful person could have acquired the reputation of a saint and thus could serve as an intermediary between the Christian faithful and their God. Panfilo would like to see in this bizarre fact a sign of “God’s loving kindness toward us” so that “even though we make our intercessor one of His enemies, God still grants our prayers as if we were asking a true saint to obtain His grace for us” (Boccaccio 27). And he concludes his speech by urging his listeners “to praise His name, which is what we began with, and venerate Him, commending ourselves to Him in our need, *in the certain knowledge that we will be heard*” (27).

These are the last words of the first story of *The Decameron*, but they are not the last words of the meta-narrative that frames the text. For after Panfilo has finished his tale with the comforting assertion that “in our need . . . we will be heard,” the narrative adds one short sentence, which stands entirely alone in the entire *Decameron*: “*Et qui si tacque.*” — “*And here he stopped speaking.*” Or even more literally perhaps, if less colloquially: “And here speaking stopped.” I have permitted myself to modify Rebhorn’s published translation here, which reads “And here he fell silent” (Boccaccio 27). I believe that the verb, *si tacere*, implies more and less than just the *falling silent of a subject*. If the phrase were there just to designate the subjective cessation of speech, it would be entirely redundant; it would be sufficient for the story to end with the words, “*sicurissimi d’essere uditi.*” — most sure to be heard. Instead, however, it is almost as if the meta-narrative calls into question that most sure expectation of “being heard” — which also means, being *saved* by the One whose name “we praise.” For the story that traces the metamorphosis of Ser Cepparello into Ciappelletto and then finally into *Saint* Ciappelletto, indicates just how far humans, in their “need” — a need that the plague does not create but only brings out into the open as a shared dimension of life — are ready to go to convince themselves that “we will be heard.” But if words, and names are as untrustworthy as this story suggests, how certain can the hope to be heard really be? Is this the reason that the text suggests that Panfilo may not so much have ended his story as interrupted the interpretation he seeks to give it — that he bit his tongue, as it

were, in order to stop himself from speaking what could not be spoken. Or, as Benjamin puts it, what “is denied — *versagt* — the word.” Panfilo’s story leads us to this limit but does not transcend it. That step is left to the reader, or the listener.

At the end of *The Decameron*, Boccaccio insists that his stories leave this final but never definitive step up to the reader, not out of willfulness, but because this is the way language works:

Like everything else, these stories, such as they are, may be harmful or helpful, depending upon the listener. . . . No single word has ever been wholesomely construed by a corrupt mind. And just as proper language can do nothing for such a mind, that which is improper cannot contaminate one that is well disposed. . . . Still, whoever reads through these stories can skip over those that give offense and read only those that promise delight, for lest anyone should be deceived, each story bears a sign on its brow of that which it keeps hidden within its bosom. (342 – 44)

In reflecting upon Covid, and the language it gives rise to, we would do well to be attentive to “the signs on its brow,” mindful of the possibility that what they signify may be “kept hidden within its bosom.” It is this respect for and acceptance of that which must remain unsaid — *dem Wort versagt* as Benjamin writes — that perhaps is the secret of that “highly political style of writing” to which he aspired and of which Panfilo provides such a striking instance. Perhaps this strange “silence” points toward what might be called a “politics of compassion,” in which the prefix *com-* both joins and separates the passion it precedes, as the sign of a sharing that does not deny its irreducible singularity.

III. Walter Benjamin: Political Discourse Should Mean More Than It Can Say

Walter Benjamin’s remarks on how a certain refusal to speak can become an essential part of a politically significant discourse, are contained in a famous letter he wrote in July of 1916 — in the midst of the First World War — to Martin Buber. Buber had invited Benjamin to contribute to a newly founded journal that he had established — *Der Jude* (*The Jew*). After reading the first issue of this periodical, Benjamin decided that he could not participate in it, and for reasons that involved his idea of political discourse. Benjamin refused what he felt was the way the dominant notion of politically effective discourse tended to instrumentalize both language and action itself. The latter he asserted was construed as the result of “motives” or intentions that in turn were assumed to be capable of being expressed directly and univocally. More specifically, Benjamin argued that a concatenation of individual words into a phrase — *Wort-an-Wort-Reihen* as he puts it in German — produced a mechanism for expressing what could not and should not be expressed directly, namely “the correct Absolute” — in German, a “*Mechanismus zur Verwirklichung des richtigen Absoluten*” — which increasingly had come to dominate the political discourse of the time. Through this mechanism, Benjamin argued, political discourse resulted in what he called the “elimination of the unsayable” (*Elimination des Unsagbaren*). The German word “Elimination” used by Benjamin provides an excellent example of precisely what he is writing about: by driving the word “out” (e-) of its constitutive limits the word can take the appearance of having a purely internal, “absolute” meaning, which in turn would allow it to claim value as an expression of an Absolute truth (*des richtigen Absoluten*) in “crystalline purity.” What is thus eliminated is the space in between, the space of differential relationality, which is replaced by what Benjamin calls the “expansive tendency” that supposes a continuum underlying the alignment of word-on-word. It is the differential space between and within words, the space of signifying as distinct from meaning. Such an

elimination is not just problematic for Benjamin — it is destructive insofar as such “expansive” tendencies eliminate what Benjamin, in another essay written at roughly the same period, calls the “overdetermination” of language — a term that Freud also uses in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to describe the ambivalent and ambiguous language of the Unconscious. This implies a very different concept of how words work — Freud therefore can designate words as the ideal medium for dreams precisely because they can signify much more and other than what they are usually taken to designate (324).

In a much later essay on “The Storyteller,” Benjamin gives a less theologically tainted account of how what is denied to explicit language — *dem Wort Versagte* — functions in a narrative discourse. Benjamin quotes an episode recounted by “the first storyteller of the Greeks . . . Herodotus”. It is the story of how the Egyptian king, Psammenitus, reacts following his defeat by the Persian king, Cambyses:

Cambyzes was bent on humbling his prisoner. . . . [H]e . . . arranged that his prisoner should see his daughter pass by as a maid going to the well with her pitcher. While all the Egyptians were lamenting and bewailing this spectacle, Psammenitus stood alone, mute and motionless, his eyes fixed on the ground; and when presently he saw his son, who was being taken along in the procession to be executed, he likewise remained unmoved. But when he subsequently recognized one of his servants, an old impoverished man, in the rank of the prisoners, he beat his fists against his head and gave all the signs of deepest mourning. (Benjamin 148)

And after retelling the story, Benjamin argues that it is exemplary:

This tale shows what true storytelling is. . . . Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is utterly dry. That is why, after thousands of years, this story from ancient Egypt is still capable of provoking astonishment and reflection. (148)

In his letter to Buber, Benjamin had contrasted his notion of a politically effective political style, which he describes as “prosaic” and descriptive, with the expansive and expressive accumulation of what claims to be “crystalline,” meaning through a word-on-word sequencing. In regard to “true storytelling” a similar process is described, that of a purely (but selectively) descriptive account that does not exhaust itself in an explicit meaning, as distinct from the tendency of what Benjamin designates as “information” — today we would call it the media — to supply explanations and suggest full and “crystalline” transparency. What is involved is the distinction between what I try to designate as “meaning” — an intention assumed to be fully embodied in its object, words and things — and significance, which is an ongoing and never completable process (that is also a regress and, as Sterne might have said, *digressive* as well).

But how then can such a complex process, that interdicts — *versagt* — full meaning to anything sayable (*Sagbare*), relate to what I have called a “politics of compassion”? To try to respond to this question — if not to answer it — let me conclude with a fairly brief digression to a text of Derrida. One does not usually associate his deconstructive writing style with the notion of compassion. And yet at a certain time in his life, towards the end of the 1990s, the word appears to assume a certain importance in his writing. The context for its emergence is Derrida’s questioning of how the relation of humans to animals has developed, above all over the past few centuries, and above all in what is still called “the West” — not to privilege it but to distinguish from other regions and cultures and thus to avoid a precipitous universalization or “anthropologization”. And given the wartime context of Benjamin’s remarks, it is perhaps significant that Derrida situates the question of

compassion, or lack of it, in a wartime setting:

For about two centuries, . . . , we who call ourselves men or humans, . . . , have been involved in an unprecedented transformation. This mutation affects the experience of what we continue to call, imperturbably, . . . , the animal and/or animals. . . . It is all too evident that in the course of the last two centuries these traditional forms of treatment of the animal have been turned upside down by the joint development of zoological, ethological, biological, and genetic forms of *knowledge*, which remain inseparable from *techniques* of intervention *into* their object, . . . , the living animal. . . . and all of that in the service of a certain being and the putative human well-being of man. . . . No one can deny seriously any more, or for very long, that men do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or to hide it from themselves If these images are “pathetic,” if they evoke sympathy, it is also because they “pathetically” open the immense question of pathos . . . that is, of suffering, pity and compassion; and the place that has to be accorded to the interpretation of this compassion, to the sharing of suffering among the living, to the law, ethics and politics that must be brought to bear upon this experience of compassion. What has been happening for two centuries now involves a new experience of this compassion. . . . The two centuries I have been referring to somewhat casually in order to situate the present . . . have been those of an unequal struggle, a war . . . being waged between, on the one hand, those who violate not only animal life but even and also this sentiment of compassion, and, on the other hand, those who appeal for an irrefutable testimony to this pity.

War is waged over the matter of pity. . . . To think the war we find ourselves waging is not only a duty, a responsibility, an obligation, it is also a necessity, . . . that, like it or not, directly or indirectly, no one can escape. (*The Animal* 24–29)

Like the young Benjamin, Derrida sees war as involving language, and in particular words and their arrangement. And like Benjamin, Derrida implicitly at least distinguishes the notion of words having unitary meanings from their intrinsic and significant ambiguity, which is no less internal than external. Unlike Benjamin, however, he is even willing to create neologisms if this can help expose the singular and plurality of words and their resulting significance. For instance, the neologism “animot,” which echoes the plural, “animaux,” that is all too often sacrificed, subsumed and rendered invisible by the use of what Derrida calls “the generalized singular,” “animal,” with or without the definite article.

But in the essay being discussed, it is another word that provides us with the wherewithal, the means, of critically or deconstructively analyzing and exposing an alternative to the “expansive” — and shall we add, “militaristic” tendency to use words in series to articulate what can never be exhaustively articulated as such, namely, the “Absolute proper” (*richtiges Absolut*) as the origin and end of all speech and writing. This move of Derrida is based on an entirely fortuitous convergence between two French verbs, namely *être*, to be, and *suivre*, to follow — a convergence that resonates phonically only when the two verbs are used in the first person singular, namely *suis*, meaning both “am” and “follow.”

In the Old Testament Book of Exodus, when Moses asks God to give him His Name so that Moses can transmit it to the people of Israel, God replies, “Tell them that I am who I am” (sometimes rendered as “I am who I will be”) (*Exodus* I. 8). This is perhaps one of the most striking instances of that pseudo-political rhetoric criticized by Benjamin, which I have elsewhere associated with what I call “the monotheological identity paradigm.” Words are aligned one after the other in what strives to present an “expansive tendency” — one that expands and expresses an initial identity that is self-contained: whose being is at once singular,

universal and absolute, ab-solved from all relation to and dependence on any other.

What by contrast the fortuitous and singular convergence of the French verb “to be” with the verb “to follow” brings to the fore, especially when used in the singular, is to provide a perspective for reconsidering “the war” against non-human animals and perhaps wars more generally. In both cases the war involves an attempt to distract and detract from a situation of shared vulnerability, suffering and in the final analysis mortality, common to all living beings, human and nonhuman, insofar as they are both determined by life in the singular. The perspective emphasized here is not the generalized singular of the species, but the differential singularity of the living qua individuals, which despite their name are irreducibly and constitutively *dividual*.

The war in the name of species is thus a war that seeks to deny this dividual and mortal singularity of the living by ascribing it to one species as opposed to another, as its mortal enemy. It is supported by a tradition of knowledge and technology that is the conceptual and practical correlative of that word-on-word serialization criticized by Benjamin. Which is why the convergence of “I am” with “I follow” can help Derrida to unpack and expose the heterogeneous divergence at the heart of words, things and above all singular living beings. For “to follow” as Derrida argues, is to come after no less than to pursue: it moves backward and forward at one and the same time, splitting the sameness of that time regressively, progressively and digressively.

But such a divergence cannot simply be recognized by means of a generalizing proper name much less a concept. It can only do justice to the singular plurality involved through an experience that is irreducibly affective. It involves that which both exceeds and falls short of conceptual generality — insofar as it is *felt*. As anxiety, joy, hope, aggressivity — but perhaps above all as the affective experience of compassion, whereby the prefix, “com-” defines a relationship in which the self “feels” itself as (though it were) another.^③

Notes

① On January 15, 18 and 27, 2023, at the invitation of Professor Yue Zhuo from Shanghai University, Professor Samuel Weber gave a tripartite lecture series entitled “Reading as Compassion” online. “Toward a Politics of Compassion” is the first lecture. Edited by Yue Zhuo, this text is published here for the first time.

② Recent studies of compassion in *The Decameron* and more generally in Boccaccio tend to emphasize the complexity and ambiguity of its portrayal: see the articles by Olivia Holmes, F. Regina Psaki and Gur Zak in the Spring 2019 issue of *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, volume 22, number 1, pp. 5 – 58.

③ At the very end of the second year of lecture-seminars devoted to the question of Hospitality (recently published in French and forthcoming in English), Derrida risks the following formulation to differentiate the unique from the singular living being more precisely in regard to the process of substitution: “It does not suffice for the subject of substitution ... to be unique, irreplaceable, elected to offer its place to the other; what is irreplaceable must also feel *itself* to be irreplaceable, [insofar as] it feels and feels *itself*, and therefore must [feel itself to] be a self having a relation to itself, which is not the case for every living being that is unique and irreplaceable in its existence. This self, this ipseity, is the condition of ethical substitution qua compassion sacrifice expiation, etc.” (*Hospitalité* II 353 – 354). To which I would only add that this self-feeling defines a relation to and of the self that is conditioned not just by and as *ipseity*, but above all by *illeity*. This is why perhaps the “experience” of compassion cannot and should not be aligned, as Derrida does in the passage just quoted, with “sacrifice, expiation, etc.” Compassion can have no simple return on investment, which is why it is perhaps uncannily, more literary — as Boccaccio has shown — than ethical.

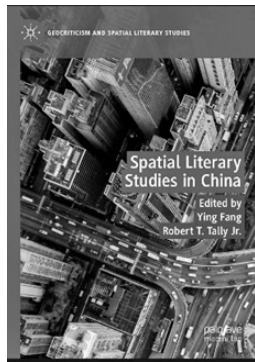
Works Cited

- Baker, Mike, and Danielle Ivory. “Why Public Health is in Crisis Across the U. S.” *The New York Times*, 18 October 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/18/us/coronavirus-public-health.html>. 25 October 2022.
- Benjamin, Walter. “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” *Selected Writings*. Vol. 3 (1935 – 1938).

- Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006. 143 – 166.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. Wayne Rebhorn. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2013.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- . *Hospitalité II. Séminaire (1996 – 1997)*. Eds. Pascale-Anne Brault et Peggy Kamuf. Paris: Seuil, 2022.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams: The Complete and Definitive Text*. Ed. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
- Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Trans. Rex Warner, New York: Penguin Books, 1972.
- “The Plague of Athens,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plague_of_Athens#Typhus, 25 October 2021.

(责任编辑:冯 伟)

· 书讯 ·



Spatial Literary Studies in China

主编:方英, Robert T. Tally Jr.

出版社: Palgrave Macmillan

出版时间: 2022 年 11 月

本书着眼于向国际学术界展示中国“文学空间研究”的大致现状、前沿探索 and 重要成果,突出了中国学者在这个领域的理论、话语建构和批评模式探索,彰显了中国立场与自信;兼顾中外、古今理论资源和文学分析,形成了中、西文学研究的对话与互补,具有一定程度的历史纵深和地理广度;包括理论研究、概念梳理、文本分析、文学史重构、数字地图、人文地理等多种角度,基本上勾勒出中国文学空间研究的主要轮廓。

还有三点值得一提。其一,在“Notes on Contributors”和每篇文章的脚注中保留了作者和译者的中文姓名,文章和注释中保留了中国人名、地名、书名等专有名词以及古诗词、空间概念、参考文献的中文,有些甚至加注了拼音;文章和注释中出现的中国人名的英文表达采用了“姓前名后”的模式。其二,作者除了大陆学者,还有台湾著名学者梁一萍(Iping Liang)、在四川大学工作的美国学者 Sophia Kidd(康书雅);Sophia Kidd 研究的是郭璞的《江赋》。其三,作者中既有权威学者,也有青年新锐,体现了学术传承以及塔利对年轻学者的关爱与期望。