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# Beautiful Knowledge, or, Reproducing the University Again? Walter Benjamin and the Institution of Knowledge

Graham MacPhee

Ruins jutting into the sky can appear doubly beautiful on clear days when, in their windows or above their contours, the gaze meets passing clouds. Through the transient spectacle it opens in the sky, destruction reaffirms the eternity of these ruins.

–Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*.

It is easy to see that the problematic of ruin poses questions for the transmission of the past, but as we are reminded by a certain discourse of the university's ruin it also involves anticipation and futurity. Indeed, this more complex temporality is what distinguishes recent statements that the university 'founders', that it is 'injured' and 'in ruins' associated with deconstruction from a quite different discourse of crisis or decline which has tended to dominate public debate over the university in the United States, associated with the defence of a traditional conception of the Humanities and more broadly of 'Western Civilisation'.<sup>1</sup> This more familiar discourse of decline depends on and implies a straightforward and essentially closed temporality: the present 'crisis' in the university is to be remedied by a return to the proper or 'traditional' university, by the resumption of an established content, purpose and concomitant institutional arrangement. The assessment of the university's ruin associated with deconstruction, however, cannot be articulated in these terms, and rather than taking the tradition of the university for granted it puts in question the very

possibility of the institution of knowledge. As such, then, this discourse of ruin implies the question of the future of the university, the question of what issues from or is anticipated by the university's ruin. Deconstruction's statement of the ruin of the university, then, already poses the question of its issue, that is it promises or anticipates *different* possible outcomes or trajectories. And it is here that the work of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin becomes relevant for contemporary debates over the university and the institution of knowledge, for Benjamin's complex notion of tradition, as persistence, as destruction, and as anticipation, informs his own engagement with the question of the possibility of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> We might say, following Benjamin, that the ruin of the university itself *anticipates tradition*.

However, to draw out Benjamin's relevance here needs some work, for although there are numerous incidents within Benjamin's corpus where the institution is remarked or remembered, such instances are scattered and disconnected, and further, they deal primarily with the institution of literature and art—from the publishing industry and the transformation of literary genres to the rise of the newspaper and the new technologies of reproduction and transmission which characterise the culture of modernity—and apparently less clearly or straightforwardly with the institution of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> And this distinction, between beauty and knowledge, is of course precisely to the point, since it is this distinction which in so many ways has proved important for the delimitation and definition of knowledge for the modern, Western university. But if Benjamin's thinking recognises the complex tradition of this distinction, it neither seeks refuge in one side or the other, nor in the fantasy that this distinction could easily be escaped or erased. Famously Benjamin never held a university post and failed to place his work securely and squarely within the main 'alternative' institutional structures which emerged in

the inter-war period in Germany outside of the university, primarily the leagues and committees associated with the Third International and the KPD. However, not only would it be a mistake to present Benjamin as somehow ‘outside’ of or uncontaminated by the university, but more pertinently, it would be wrong to see the question of the institution of knowledge as external or incidental to his work. Benjamin’s engagement with the limits implied by institutional frameworks of all kinds, including art and literature, was informed by and sought to develop his own early engagement with Kant’s Critical Philosophy which marked his university studies, and in particular Kant’s project of securing knowledge by setting its proper limits. If Benjamin’s corpus rarely touches directly on the university, the question of the institution of knowledge, of the limits of knowledge and the fate of this limitation in modernity, remains central to Benjamin’s work on vision, language, literature, aesthetics, architecture, technology, and politics.

This paper argues that the question of the institution is for Benjamin fundamentally a question of the destruction, or differential return, of tradition. This paper, then, is concerned to explore Benjamin’s significance not simply for thinking the ruin of the university, but for thinking the tradition of the university’s ruin in deconstruction. Consequently it looks first at a text that is often cited as its inaugural moment, Derrida’s essay ‘Mochlos; or, the Conflict of the Faculties’ (Rand, 1992; 1-34), a text which is itself centrally concerned with the retrieval and re-transmission of a key moment in the modern university’s tradition, namely Kant’s late series of essays collected as *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798). In returning to Derrida, then, this paper also returns to Kant, and it seeks to sketch, however imperfectly, something of the different trajectories implied by Derrida’s transmission of Kant. This sketch provides a context for pursuing Benjamin’s own engagement with Kantian

epistemology, which is shown to underlie his interest in aesthetic perception. Finally, the paper returns to the tradition of ‘Mochlos’ in order to reflect on the persistence of questions of tradition and anticipation within Derrida’s announcement of the university’s ruin.

#### ANTICIPATING KNOWLEDGE

In reposing the question of ‘university responsibility’ in ‘Mochlos’, Derrida frames this question in terms of the translation, transmission, or tradition of Kant’s text in a way that invokes Benjamin’s thinking:<sup>4</sup>

I set myself the following rule: to try to translate *The Conflict of the Faculties* in part, and under the heading of an introductory or paradigmatic essay, so as to recognise its points of untranslatability, by which I mean anything that no longer reaches us and remains outside of the usage of our era. I shall try to analyse those untranslatable nodes; and the benefits I anticipate ... will be an inventory not merely of what no longer is, or of certain contradictions, laws of conflicts, or antinomies of university reason, but of what, as well, may exceed this dialectical rationality itself (Rand, 1992: 12-13).

In this formulation, translation or tradition is not simply an accidental addition to the question of university responsibility and of university reason, but becomes the necessary framework or paradigm for tracing the limits of the institution, questioning their legitimacy, and discovering what they exclude. In echoing Benjamin in ‘Mochlos’, Derrida’s text recognises its own inauguration of tradition: Derrida’s

retrieval of Kant's text stands not simply at the end but also, in Benjamin's sense of the term, at the 'origin' of a certain tradition.<sup>5</sup> Derrida describes this act of translation itself as an opening or moment of anticipation, as heralding both future lines of investigation and future gains. But while Derrida's reading seeks to register what is untranslatable in Kant's text, it is also worth considering what *is* translated by Derrida and how that translation is itself ordered.

Kant's conception of the university in 'The Conflict of the Philosophy Faculty with the Theology Faculty', the first essay in *The Conflict of the Faculties* and the focus of Derrida's concern, operates in the larger context of the Critical Philosophy. In posing the question of 'university responsibility' Derrida locates the question of the institution of knowledge within the problematic of autonomy and heteronomy, and so within terms which extend beyond the first Critique to the second and third. Just as Kant's conception of autonomy and heteronomy depends on the limit that demarcates inside and outside, the thrust of Derrida's critique lies in its identification of the university as imposing inviolable and fixed limits which prove untenable. Derrida identifies two different kinds of limit which are fundamental to Kant's conception of the institution of knowledge: first between the faculties, between what is presented by Derrida as the purity of philosophy and the impurity of faculties tied to the contingency of historical state formation and power, a distinction not so much between the transcendental and the empirical—since the natural sciences are included in the Faculty of Philosophy by Kant—but between contemplation and action; and second, between what constitutes a legitimate and what constitutes an illegitimate conflict between the faculties (Rand, 1992: 25). While this latter may sound less fundamental than the first, in fact it proves central to the Kantian project of establishing proper legal title to knowledge, and much of the force of Derrida's essay

lies here. ‘Mochlos’ develops problems surrounding Kant’s fixing of the transcendental co-ordinates through which knowledge is to be secured by posing the question of the legality of the transcendental’s claim to legislate; that is, it rearticulates the question of the lawfulness of the institution as the question of the legitimacy of the institution of law itself. But before following Derrida’s argument here it is worth reviewing his account of this first distinction, that between action and contemplation, not least because it offers a certain insight into the temporal articulation of Kant’s conception of the institution.

The central division within the university which Kant takes up in *The Conflict of the Faculties* is that between what had been traditionally designated as the ‘higher’ faculties—theology, law and medicine—and what had traditionally been designated as the ‘lower’ faculty of philosophy—which, confusingly for a modern reader, includes what we would today recognise as the disciplines of the natural sciences and the social sciences as well as philosophy. But while this division is traditional, and is adopted rather than proposed by Kant, Derrida demonstrates that it is not incidental but fundamental to Kant’s thought by translating its terms into that of the division between action and contemplation: he identifies the higher faculties with the language of action and command, and the lower faculty with the language of contemplation or truth. Derrida’s translation is valuable since it reinserts this text into Kant’s larger project and demonstrates its importance to his understanding of reason and his sense of the political and institutional conditions of enlightenment. In his programmatic essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (1784), for example, the institutional possibility of reason under the enlightened absolutism of the Prussian monarchy depends on the distinction between acting freely and thinking freely, a distinction which the essay sees crystallised in Frederick the Great’s motto: ‘Argue as much as you like and about

what you like, but obey!’ (Kant 1991: 59). And it is precisely the ironies for autonomy and freedom which are made evident by this statement which are developed by Derrida in his understanding of the division between action and contemplation, which he sees as an attempt to secure the absolute purity of philosophy by expunging all that is ‘external’ to it, a will to purity that seeks to bring language to order and implicates philosophy in the mechanisms of state power. In imposing ‘an indivisible and rigorously uncrossable line’ between truth and action within language, Derrida argues that this division should be understood in terms of the pathology of control, a pathology which seeks to ‘limit the effects of confusion, simulacrum, parasiting, equivocality and undecidability produced by language’ (Rand, 1992: 18).

Derrida’s translation of the arrangement of faculties into the division between action and contemplation is important, and yet while providing a certain purchase on Kant’s text it also loses something of its embeddedness there. In Kant’s formulation of the division, its temporal issue becomes a central concern, a point which is effaced in Derrida’s account: its description of this division as ‘indivisible’ and ‘uncrossable’ is valid, but only in the isolated present. In ‘What is Enlightenment’ Kant qualifies this division by locating it within a temporal framework: once ‘man’s inclination and vocation to *think freely* has developed’ the essay argues ‘it gradually reacts upon the mentality of the people, who thus gradually become increasingly able to *act freely*’ (1991: 59). That is, the essay conceives of this division as an event in time whose terms reformulate themselves in their reciprocity, so that their opposition is itself renegotiated and reformulated over time. However we understand Kant’s relationship to state power, censorship and control—and ‘The Conflict of the Philosophy Faculty with the Theology Faculty’ was itself prompted by the censorship of Kant’s *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* in 1792—action and contemplation are conceived

of by Kant as dynamic and open to reformulation over time, and their opposition is itself a historically specific phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> Derrida's account here, then, occludes the dynamic nature of the *culturing* of reason and the reformulation of its oppositions over time, and as a consequence he underestimates Kant's thinking of the institution of knowledge as a temporal event. With this in mind it's possible to return to *The Conflict of the Faculties* and retrieve a different understanding of the arrangement of the faculties which it proposes.

It is perhaps easy to forget the radicality of the Critical Philosophy which underpins Kant's account of the university in *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Against a long and venerable tradition, Kant refused to dismiss appearances as illusory and sought instead to base knowledge in the empirical world, yet without simply conceiving of knowledge as the passive recording of sense data. Consequently Kant restricted knowledge to the realm of experience, while at the same time recognising that it required an active or productive source in judgement. Such a productive notion of judgement, however, requires orientation, and Kant recognised that knowledge of the sensible realm of experience had to be supplemented by recourse to the supersensible, to a conceptual topography beyond the limits of experience but through which experience itself becomes possible. But the question necessarily arises as to how this conceptual topography might be delineated and justified. Kant's conception of freedom would not allow him to appeal to the externally imposed authority of religion, whether in terms of revealed religion or mystical insight, and yet any attempt to derive the supersensible from experience—that is, to construct it as an object of knowledge—would transgress the proper limits of knowledge. Thus for Kant the supersensible can neither simply be imposed by religious fiat, nor derived from experience on the model of knowledge. His solution does not derive the supersensible

from the realm of experience, but instead requires that the topography of the supersensible be compatible with finite human experience. In ‘What is Orientation in Thinking’ (1786) for example, Kant concedes the ‘figurative’ nature of discussion of the supersensible, indicating that it can never claim the title of knowledge; yet at the same time he insists that such accounts must be orientated towards making the categories ‘suitable for *use in the experiential world*’ (1991: 237). For categorical judgement to be possible, Kant argues, the categories have to be capable of being adjusted to the forms of human intuition (space and time) and it is this *a priori* orientation which allows the contours of the supersensible to be discovered and mapped; that is, although the topography of the supersensible cannot be derived from experience as knowledge, it cannot simply be manipulated at will, but must conform to reason through a regulative analogy to finite human experience.

The implications of this line of thinking might be summarised firstly by noting that Kant secures knowledge by setting limits to knowledge, by curtailing the scope within which claims to knowledge can be made; and secondly, that he recognises that such limits depend on the contours of what is posited as beyond them, and that therefore the question of this beyond cannot simply be left to be decided by authority, whether in the form of religious hierarchies, mystical convictions or the bureaucratic machinery of the state. This double insight underlies the organisation and functioning of the university as a space of conflict in ‘The Conflict of the Philosophical Faculty with the Theology Faculty’. Crucially, what Kant calls the philosophy faculty is composed of both the natural and social sciences – the disciplines of knowledge – and philosophy – the discipline concerned with securing knowledge by orientating judgement in the realm of the supersensible. This organisation ties the justification and validation of knowledge to the investigation of finite human experience rather

than allowing the supersensible to be determined by the dictates of authority or the givenness of tradition, but without making them equivalent: philosophy and the natural and social sciences are thus contained in the same faculty, yet remain distinct (Kant, 1979: 43-47). And because Kant correlates categorical judgement to finite human experience he recognises it as a temporal event, and so his model of the university registers the temporal nature of human reason, its development or culturing over time, by placing the philosophy faculty in negotiation with the historical accumulation of custom and belief, or tradition, in the shape of the faculty of theology (Kant, 1979: 33-37). Kant's adoption of this arrangement, then, should be understood neither as blind adherence to tradition nor naïve faith in the spontaneity of reason, but as an attempt to bring reason and tradition into alignment over time.

This attempt was motivated by the dual recognition within the Critical Philosophy of the necessity of setting limits to knowledge on the one hand, and of the problems and dangers involved in legislating such limits on the other. Thus the question of the institution of knowledge necessarily involves the question of law, which Kant developed in terms of the negotiation of autonomy and heteronomy in order to correlate freedom and lawfulness. This linkage is central to Kant's argument for the lawful use of reason in 'What is Orientation in Thinking?':

Freedom of thought ... signifies the subjection of reason to no laws other than those *which it imposes on itself*; and its opposite is the maxim of the *lawless use* of reason (in order that it may, as the genius imagines, see further than it does when restricted by laws). Naturally enough, the result of this is that, if reason does not wish to be subject to the law which it imposes on itself, it must bow beneath the yoke of laws which someone

else imposes on it; for nothing—not even the greatest absurdity—can continue to operate for long without some kind of law (1991: 247-8).

What may appear as a static opposition between autonomy and heteronomy in its formulation here is articulated in *The Conflict of the Faculties* within a temporal framework orientated towards the lawful use of reason; that is, the essay conceives of the university not as a static *institution* given by reason conceived of as a fixed body of law, but as a temporal event or process of *instituting* the lawfulness of reason in negotiation with the givenness of tradition. Thus the image which the essay uses to present this conception of the university is that of the parliament or sovereign legislative body: according to this image, the university is the space of negotiation where the claims of tradition or heteronomy, the historical accretions of human sense and belief, can be modified and realigned in relation to the autonomy and self-regulation of human reason (Kant, 1979: 53-61). The sovereignty and legitimacy of this body, then, does not simply lie in a notion of reason conceived of as a fixed and already given body of laws, but in its ability to offer a free or undetermined space in which a body of legislations can develop over time out of the interplay of tradition and reason. But equally, if it is fair to argue that in ‘Mochlos’ Derrida underestimates Kant’s formulation of the legislative institution of knowledge as a temporal event, then it is important to recognise that the essay also develops its critique of Kant at another level, namely in terms of the lawfulness of legality itself. And notwithstanding the radicality which we have identified in Kant’s thinking here, it proves unable to escape the force of this second critique.

The latter part of ‘Mochlos’ pursues the second distinction identified above, that between what Kant designates as legitimate and as illegitimate conflicts between the higher and lower faculties, and far from being secondary or incidental it provides a powerful point of leverage for Derrida. Kant’s image of the university as the sovereign legislative body which institutes the lawful use of reason is shown to be framed in terms of a prior legal distinction, that between legitimate and illegitimate conflicts; that is, Derrida demonstrates that Kant is able to understand the university as the space of legitimate conflicts between the faculties of philosophy and theology only by already having determined the law. Derrida’s formulation that ‘[o]nly within the epoch of the law is it possible to distinguish legal from illegal conflicts, and above all, as Kant would wish, conflicts from war’ poses significant difficulties for Kant’s attempt to validate categorical judgement and secure knowledge, and strikes at the heart of Kant’s project (Rand, 1992: 30). The machinery of categorical judgement was designed to secure legitimate possession of knowledge while maintaining the freedom and spontaneity of human reason, to provide proper legal title to knowledge without submitting to a legal framework imposed via an external authority. It is only in these terms that the culturing of human reason could be conceived of as the free and uncoerced negotiation, or ‘conflict’, of reason and tradition, and not as their arbitrary and violent alignment, or ‘war’. But in Derrida’s formulation of legality both in ‘Mochlos’ and elsewhere the distinction between ‘conflict’ and ‘war’ which Kant wants to make is shown not to hold, since the transcendental co-ordinates of categorical judgement, through which knowledge and freedom are to be secured, themselves imply a prior configuration which cannot itself be justified or validated: the conditions of lawfulness, we might say, are themselves illegitimate.

Derrida's deconstruction of Kantian legality here is powerful, but its issue or tradition is not unequivocal, not least because in underestimating the temporal nature of categorical judgement 'Mochlos' makes it difficult to conceive of an instituting of knowledge in any other terms but these. If the dynamic aspect of Kantian judgement is occluded then the *issue* of knowledge, in both senses of the term, risks being closed off, since from this perspective knowledge can only ever be conceived of *as knowledge*. As we have seen, Derrida identifies his text as 'introductory or paradigmatic', as instituting a paradigm which anticipates, but we might ask, what kind of anticipation is possible now: is it possible to anticipate different kinds of 'knowledge' to the knowledge imagined by Kant, perhaps even different kinds of legislation or lawfulness, or, given the violence of law and its institution, is such anticipation itself unlawful or to be judged illegitimate? This equivocation presents itself in Derrida's formulation of anticipation already cited: Derrida anticipates not simply 'an inventory ... of what was and no longer is, or of certain contradictions, laws of conflicts, or antinomies of university reason, but of what, as well, may exceed this dialectical rationality itself' (Rand, 1992: 13). Very clearly what is anticipated is not simply a better or more complete cataloguing of the transcendental conditions of knowledge than that offered by Kant, but an 'inventory' of what exceeds it. But is what is being anticipated an inventory of what cannot be assimilated to the transcendental co-ordinates of dialectical rationality, of what escapes the law or proves incommensurable with it? Or is it rather an inventory of the shifting topography which configures these transcendental co-ordinates and whose tradition and issue refund and reconfigure the possibility of law? In each case a standpoint is adopted *within* the transcendental co-ordinates—hence the idea of an 'inventory' or ledger upon which certain 'benefits' are to be registered—and in each case it is a

standpoint which does not simply reproduce what is already known or constituted as an object of knowledge within these co-ordinates. But in the first case such an inventory could not offer knowledge of the limits of knowledge, since from this standpoint what emerges is the impossibility of drawing such limits with certainty; in the case of the second, such an inventory might adumbrate the configuration which gives or legislates the transcendental co-ordinates by recognising them as one possible configuration amongst many. It is within this context, of an equivocation within the tradition of Derrida's anticipation, that Benjamin's relevance for the question of the institution of knowledge can be recognised.

In many ways Benjamin's approach to Kant demonstrates important similarities with that of Derrida in 'Mochlos', and yet at the same time significant differences emerge. Like Derrida, Benjamin recognised that Kant's attempt to justify *a priori* the transcendental co-ordinates of categorical judgement failed to recognise its own violence; rather than being the expression of a prior and fixed configuration of being and time these co-ordinates were understood by Benjamin as just one such possible configuration among an infinite set of possible configurations.<sup>7</sup> Benjamin's position can be summarised by figuring Kant's transcendental philosophy in terms of language, an approach which Benjamin pursued in 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' (1916). In these terms, the transcendental co-ordinates which for Kant provide the conditions for knowledge would be understood in terms of the configuration of a language, the particular linguistic parameters at the level of grammar, syntax and semantics which provide the conditions of possibility for meaning. Seen from a vantage point within this horizon, the parameters of a particular language generate the possibility of an infinite range of utterance and meaning. But viewed from the vantage point of another language, and thus a different configuration

of linguistic possibility, each language can be seen to offer just one configuration of infinity among an infinite range of possible configurations. However, to translate Kant's terms into those of linguistic philosophy means that the range of such languages cannot be reduced to the range of human languages, but would have to include the 'languages' or configurations of experience given by the phenomenal world, which is why in 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' Benjamin extends language to things. And it is in these terms that the essay develops its critique of Kant.

Benjamin's extension of language to things here, despite apparently verging on the nonsensical, is an important moment in his reading of Kant. Its central thrust is to dramatise the issue of Kant's fixing of the transcendental co-ordinates of knowledge in terms of finite human experience, and in refocusing the question of the conditions of knowledge through the lens of experience Benjamin is able both to recognise the temporal nature of Kantian judgement while at the same time registering its limited nature. This position emerges in 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' in the central charge levelled against human language once it is set alongside the languages of things, that of 'over naming'. In the terms of this essay, knowledge is redescribed as the activity of 'over naming' the myriad languages of things with the language of man, and thus the substitution of the particular infinity of human language for the 'unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word', the infinite possibility of other possible configurations of meaning (Benjamin, 1996: 68). That is, Benjamin acknowledges that categorical judgement involves a temporal dimension, but he objects to Kant's decision to fix the forms of intuition (space and time) in terms of human experience on the grounds that such a decision restricts knowledge within one possible spatio-temporal configuration and so imposes the

finite on the infinite. This position is developed in the important essay of 1918 'On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy', which proposes the project of 'a new concept of knowledge', and central to this project is the development of a new conception of experience (Benjamin, 1996: 102). Here Benjamin identifies Kant's conception of experience with the uniform extension in space and time of Newtonian physics, a conception which Benjamin describes as 'experience virtually reduced to a nadir' (1996: 100). But although objecting to the limited nature of the conditions of experience, Benjamin does not simply reject the Kantian apparatus of knowledge but seeks instead to refunction it within quite different spatio-temporal co-ordinates. He argues that a quite different notion of experience is needed, one which is 'multiply gradated and nonmechanical', that is, one which is no longer based on the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of the individual human subject, but which is open to different configurations of space and time.

The implications of this shift for knowledge are profound: Benjamin argues that once set within such a flexible and open notion of experience '[e]rror can no longer be explained in terms of erring, any more than the true can be explained in terms of correct understanding' (1996: 107). That is, the conception of truth as the congruence between subject and object would no longer be so much to the point, since such congruence is revealed as simply a function of a particular configuration of transcendental co-ordinates. Conversely, error becomes much more interesting once no longer conceived of as 'untruth' or simple noncorrespondence; instead, error comes to mark the folds and warps which occur at the coincidence of different sets of transcendental co-ordinates. Or in the language of the 'Task of the Translator', written five years after the Language essay of 1916, the aim of translation is not to reproduce the fluency and coherence of one language in another, but to illuminate the

configuration of a language by heightening the moments of distortion produced in the activity of overnaming, generating effects that are ‘overpowering and alien’ by transposing aspects of another language’s configuration into it which are by definition untranslatable (Benjamin, 1996: 258). As this instance indicates, Benjamin came to elaborate the new conception of ‘knowledge’ promised in ‘The Programme of the Coming Philosophy’ not in terms of knowledge to be secured within a particular set of transcendental conditions, but in terms of the partial illumination of the configuration of these conditions available in the warps and distortions generated by what is not legible within them. One of the models which Benjamin used most consistently to explore this notion of illumination was art and literature, but not because Benjamin was attempting to counterpose the aesthetic to Kantian knowledge, nor substitute the aesthetic for knowledge. Rather, through its decay or ruin the aesthetic was able to register an additional dimension of his engagement with experience which became increasingly important to Benjamin through the twenties, namely the transformation of experience in technology.

In the transmission of the aesthetic objects of the past into the present of technological modernity Benjamin discovered a concentrated and historically charged instance of illumination. The aesthetic experience encoded in such works, their ‘aura’, is understood by Benjamin as ‘a strange weave of space and time’, a particular and static configuration of experience (Benjamin, 1999: 518). The increasing penetration and reorganisation of the phenomenal world by technology, however, transforms the co-ordinates of space and time which organise experience, and so as the aesthetic objects of the past persist into the present they become increasingly bereft of the structuring of experience within which they are coherently legible; rather than being experienced authentically, aspects of them are perceived as strange, alien and

illegible. But if particular aspects of the works become in one sense illegible, these points of illegibility are precisely what provides access to the configuration of experience which orders legibility, the transcendental co-ordinates which structure knowledge. It is in these terms that Benjamin describes the activity of criticism as ‘the mortification of the works’, as the illumination or ‘knowledge’ of the structuring of experience which becomes possible through the temporal disjunction produced in the persistence of the artwork:

Mortification of the works: not then—as the romantics have it—awakening of the consciousness in living works, but the settlement of knowledge in dead ones. Beauty, which endures, is an object of knowledge. And if it is questionable whether the beauty which endures does still deserve the name, it is nevertheless certain that there is nothing of beauty which does not contain something that is worthy of knowledge. Philosophy must not attempt to deny that it re-awakens the beauty of works .... Without at least an intuitive grasp of the life of detail in the structure, all love of beauty is idle dreaming. In the last analysis structure and detail are always historically charged. The object of philosophical criticism is to show that the function of artistic forms is as follows: to make historical content, such as provides the basis of every important work of art, into a philosophical truth. This transformation of the material content [*Sachgehalt*] into truth content [*Wahrheitsgehalt*] makes the decrease in effectiveness, whereby the attraction of earlier charms diminishes decade by decade, into the basis for rebirth, in which all

ephemeral beauty is completely stripped off, and the work stands as ruin  
(1977: 182).

Benjamin's account is far from familiar arguments about the eternal truth of works of art: indeed, for Benjamin the 'truth' of the work is not timeless but *only* occurs in the process of its ruin. The artwork is understood by Benjamin as encoding a particular configuration of experience in its structuring, which is what he means when he says that 'structure and detail are always historically charged'. In enduring, this configuration becomes incompatible with that within which it is now apprehended, and its beauty is disfigured; but as such, it becomes 'an object of knowledge'. That is, the moments of disfigurement which occur over time mark the moments of incompatibility or difference between different configurations of experience; they mark what cannot be translated into this new structuring of experience. And as such they make visible or illuminate precisely what cannot be seen with this regime of visibility, what cannot appear within this configuration of appearance, namely an intimation of the configuration of appearance, and of different possibilities of configuration. It is the persistence of beauty within conditions which disfigure it, what Benjamin describes as the temporally fluctuating illegibility of the 'material content', which makes possible the emergence of a 'truth content', that is, the flickering illumination of what cannot appear. And it is in this sense that, although 'it is questionable whether beauty which endures does still deserve the name', in its ruinous endurance beauty none the less 'contain[s] something that is worthy of knowledge'.

## BEAUTY IN RUINS

Benjamin responded to a contemporary's claim that 'Science cannot lead to the naive enjoyment of art any more than geologists and botanists can awaken a feeling for the beauty of landscape' by pointing to the armature of assumption upon which it hangs: 'this assertion is as incorrect as the analogy which it is supposed to support is false' Benjamin writes, adding that '[t]he geologist and the botanist can indeed do this' (1977: 182). Benjamin's interest in aesthetic experience, as we have seen, does not counterpose knowledge and aesthetic experience as incommensurable, yet nor does he make them equivalent; he does not seek to substitute the aesthetic for philosophy, nor base philosophy on aesthetic experience. Rather than fixing the relation of knowledge and the aesthetic within the transcendental structure in this way, Benjamin pursues their speculative nonidentity in the reformulation of these terms and their opposition over time: 'Beauty, which endures', writes Benjamin, 'is an object of knowledge'.

This paper has not sought to oppose or play off Benjamin against Derrida, nor to propose an unrelated and alternative tradition that might somehow stand outside the tradition of questioning of which Derrida's work has become such a powerful part. Rather, Benjamin's thinking helps to reveal a certain equivocation within the tradition of Derrida's anticipation in 'Mochlos'. Most obviously, Benjamin reminds us of something which has not been transmitted or translated into that tradition; namely, that for Kant knowledge is to be instituted not in its conflict with art or aesthetic experience, but in its conflict with *theology*. That is, the conflict in Kant's text, as we have seen, is not a static opposition between the determinant judgement of knowledge and the reflective judgement of the aesthetic, but the negotiation of judgement and the historical accretion of human value and belief in the form of theology.<sup>8</sup> Benjamin both anticipates Derrida's tradition here and deviates from it, in that he both pursues the

relation of aesthetic experience and knowledge while at the same time gesturing to a hidden or vestigial relationship between knowledge and theology which might reformulate their terms.

Derrida's critique of the ineluctable violence of legislation is powerful, but in eliding the dynamic nature of Kant's conception of the institution of knowledge it risks occluding the possibility of different configurations of 'knowledge'. And if the institution of knowledge can only be conceived of in terms of a fixed and inviolable machinery of categorical judgement, then the ineluctability of violence will press for alternative or 'dissensual' models from within the transcendental structure to counterpose to it; the most obvious example is art, which would come to mark a perpetual and atemporal excess or limit to the schematising of concept and intuition, a perpetual reminder of an unknown and unknowable excess to categorical judgement. Where Benjamin sees in the decay of aesthetic experience a mode of illuminating possibilities of configuration which exceed the transcendental limits of a historically conceived experience, the risk remains that Derrida's tradition might come to counterpose to the *fixity* of Kantian knowledge a *fixed* notion of the aesthetic as that which exceeds categorical judgement. Benjamin's thinking of the beauty of ruin alongside the ruin of beauty is pertinent here. If Benjamin looked to the ruin of beauty in technological modernity—what he terms 'the decay of aura'—in order to illuminate different possibilities of knowledge, he also recognised that technologically penetrated experience involves a tendency to aestheticise ruin (1973: 225). In *One Way Street* he observes wryly that as we longingly look up through the broken architecture of a ruined castle our 'gaze meets passing clouds', reinscribing the fixed spatio-temporal organisation which Benjamin characterised as auratic. In this image we are reminded that the 'transient spectacle' offered by ruin may itself coalesce and

limit futurity, so that ‘destruction’ paradoxically ‘reaffirms the eternity of these ruins’ (1996: 470). While Benjamin sees in the ruination of beauty an intimation of a different conception of ‘knowledge’ emerging from the ruin of Kantian thought, he also warns us that we may inadvertently reproduce the fixity we had sought to elude and become transfixed by the beauty of ruin.

#### NOTES

1. For examples of the discourse of ruin associated with deconstruction see Kamuf, 1997; Rand, 1992; Readings, 1996; and Wortham, 1999. The terms cited here are taken from essays by Peggy Kamuf and Timothy Bahti respectively, both in Rand, and from the title of Bill Readings’s book.
2. For an exploration of Benjamin’s notion of tradition see Caygill, 1994.
3. The two most well known texts in which Benjamin engages with knowledge are the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ of the *Trauerspiel* study and Convolute N of the Arcades Project. In fact, Benjamin reflected extensively on the institution of knowledge via the institution of literary and art criticism, as I indicate below.
4. See also Rand, 1992: 21.
5. ‘Origin [*Ursprung*], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [*Entstehung*]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance’ (Benjamin, 1977: 45).
6. For an account which pursues the political implications of Kant’s figuring of the culturing of reason see MacPhee, 2000.
7. This account of Benjamin follows Howard Caygill’s reading of Benjamin’s thought as a ‘transcendental but speculative philosophy’ in his *Walter Benjamin. The Colour of Experience*.
8. For an account which reads the issue of Kant’s conception of the institution of knowledge in terms of a ‘conflict’ or radical difference between art or literature and knowledge see Kamuf, 1997; for an account that attempts to articulate a ‘dissensual’ model by emphasising reflective judgement over and against determinant judgement see Readings, 1992. Benjamin’s engagement with theology in terms of the historical accumulation of readings and possible modes of reading is evident in his

understanding of both Rabbinical Judaism and the Kabbalah as traditions of textual exegesis and reinterpretation; for an indication of the continuing importance of the relation between knowledge and theology see Benjamin, 1973: 255.

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