

FIGURES OF ARGUMENT

Howard Stern

Several of the published Intellectual Trajectories that I've read consider the question of whether "trajectory" is the right metaphor for the author's own personal history—because that history seems, upon reflection, to have been fortuitous or discontinuous or meandering. In my case the question is provoked by a sense that my intellectual interests haven't changed enough in the course of a relatively fortunate life to yield anything like a satisfactory quadratic equation. As a teenager I would have listed those interests as music, mathematics, and poetry. A half-century later I published a paper on words and music in the Third Symphony of Gustav Mahler; wrote a long poem on the pianist Glenn Gould that featured his recordings of Brahms and Hindemith, as well as Bach; and gave a series of seminars at the Humboldt University in Berlin in which I developed a new, to my German students undoubtedly surprising, algebraic model for the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. Nor was the work of this recent decade an ironic or sentimental *reversion* to origins; it was the prolongation of a fairly straight path. I'm overstating the case, but only by drawing the clearest possible outline. To be sure, I think and hope that I've made some good progress on my problem, which could be defined as the development of European-American aesthetics between roughly 1875 and 1925—that really was a trajectory; but the problem hasn't changed. Nevertheless, there were some connected developments in my life in the early 1980s that unexpectedly redirected my academic career; I won't dwell upon them, but they'll be the focus of my remarks today.

My parents came from Jewish families in different parts of Eastern Europe and met after the Second World War in a displaced-persons camp in Bavaria. I was born near Munich in 1947, and the family emigrated to the United States the following year, settling in Boston and soon finding its way to a largely Yiddish-speaking section of Dorchester. (My sister was born in the new country.) In general my parents were conscientious in attempting to instill in me the virtues and habits of mind that would have served me well as a Jewish boy growing up in Poland in the 1920s. I realized early, however, that my own time and place were a very different chronotope, as one says in

Howard Stern, Senior Lecturer Emeritus in Germanic Languages and Comparative Literature, was an undergraduate student at Harvard and a graduate student at Yale. After early stations in Princeton and Columbia he returned to Yale in 1982, where he taught the German language, a technical introduction to lyric poetry in German and English, and specialty topics in European narrative fiction, as well as the literature course of Directed Studies. Occasionally he also taught summer semesters at the Humboldt University in Berlin and the Technical University of Dresden. He has published critical essays on Mörike, Rilke, Morgenstern, Benjamin, Celan, Concrete Poetry, music theory, and Yiddish literature, as well as original poetry and translations of German poetry from Goethe and Schiller to Morgenstern. In 1996 he received the Yale College Teaching Prize; he retired in 2016.

literary theory; and I began to emancipate myself quietly. Chief instrument and institution of that process was public school: I loved school immediately, found it far more interesting than the practical life that my parents mistakenly assumed it was preparing me for, and resolved never to leave it—I never did. I was good at math, but I didn't want to become an actuary; I wanted to be a mathematician. I was good at languages, but I didn't want to become a commercial translator, not even a simultaneous interpreter for the glorious United Nations; I wanted to be a linguist and a poet. Furthermore, I knew that the City of Boston and the postwar American university and the relative mobility of American society in the 1950s and '60s would allow me to become such things. To use a phrase I wouldn't have understood at the time but seems exactly right to me now, I wanted to increase my amplitude as a human being. I discovered the music of the young Beethoven, in particular the First Symphony in C and the First Piano Concerto in C; and such works opened for me a world of charming elegance, brilliant wit, and easy good humor that helped to liberate me from the moody self-absorption of my adolescence and the grim necessities of life as my parents understandably perceived them. The Great C-major of Life—yes! Music was out of the question, though, as a profession: I never got the indispensable early training.

I went to the Boston Latin School, where the quality of instruction was not really high (more about this subject later), but where the ambitious boys congregated—at that time the girls had a separate Latin School—and the best among them were expected as a matter of course to attend Harvard College afterward. The classes were seated alphabetically, and I spent five years between Steinhurst and Szczepkowski in a class that included the children of immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Germany, Poland, the Ukraine, Armenia, China, and maybe other countries and nations and ethnic groups that I'm not remembering. We all learned Latin, were allowed to choose between French and German, and of course received instruction (alas, perfunctory) in our new native language, which was called not American but English—we were, after all, inhabitants of a region known as New England—and whose major poets were apparently Walter Scott, John Keats, Robert Browning, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and a few others. Unlike my fellows, I also had to attend Hebrew school in the afternoon, which ruled out sports. I mention these facts because they help to explain what it meant to me to be an American and what an American childhood was like for me.

Most of my friends were little math monsters—two of them actually grew up to be prominent mathematicians—and I was like them except that I distinguished myself also in Latin and German, won many schoolwide and even national prizes in these subjects, and obscurely recognized that my true calling was to the study of languages. I couldn't foresee that the German language would be the one to provide me, amazingly, with forty continuous years of gainful employment, but it was the only one in which I found a great teacher and mentor. Alfred Hoelzel had been born to a Jewish family in Vienna in 1934, spent the war years as a schoolboy in England, later went to college at

the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and was teaching at the Latin School to put himself through a Ph.D. program in German literature at Boston University. After school he would invite me to his house in Brookline, which was conveniently located along the footpath to the Hebrew portion of my day, and give me the run of his library. As the official class was plowing its way through the ridiculous but inevitable schoolboy primer, I was reading Schiller's *Maria Stuart* with Alfred privately. Schiller was much too hard for second-year high school German; so that was the right reading material for a talented budding philologist. (Many years later I remembered the sessions with Alfred when the great Indo-Iranist Stanley Insler, my friend and now colleague at the Koerner Center, asked me to instruct him in Yiddish. I wondered which grammar book we should use, and he protested: "Don't be silly; just give me the hardest novel in the language, and we'll read it.") Needless to say, the afternoon enrichment program with Alfred was how I really learned the modern German language in its historical depth, and eventually it gave me the strength and conviction to resist every debilitating development in foreign-language pedagogy since about 1980 – that resistance was one of my two considerable contributions to the study of German at Yale. Alfred also taught me how to translate. I remember that he let me "work along" on his translations of the plays of Walter Hasenclever, who had been the subject of his doctoral dissertation. In one passage that had been assigned to me there was a suitor for the hand of a certain lady who magnanimously said to his rival: "Ich verzichte." I looked this verb up in my dictionary and came up with the brilliant formulation "I renounce her." Nodding appreciatively, Alfred said: "'I renounce her' ... that's good ... let's move on ... No, wait ... maybe we could say 'I'll step aside.'" That solution was not in my dictionary, but that's exactly what such a character would have said if he'd been speaking English. I felt a tiny ice-cold silver hammer tap me on the forehead. Alfred and I left the Latin School together, I to enter Harvard College as expected (but after my junior year in high school, which was unusual), and he to found the German department at the new campus of the University of Massachusetts in Boston. We remained close friends until his untimely death in 1996 at the age of sixty-one, which was a great sorrow to me.

At Harvard College I began French, continued my work on German literature, and spent most of my time on math and philosophy. For a few semesters I concealed from myself the fact that I was not a math major. I would have majored in comparative literature if that had been possible; but I was required to choose a particular literature, and that was of course German. The teaching of German at Harvard at that time was not very distinguished. It was hard to learn anything useful from a Wagnerian vulgarian like Jack Stein or from Henry Hatfield, even during the quiet periods between his frequent bouts of insanity. Bernhard Blume was a charming and cultivated man with a love of poetry, and the younger people who tutored me were friendly and helpful; but in general the approach to literature was a wishy-washy mixture of periods, movements, antecedents, influences, parallel passages from diaries and letters, and some close but not very close reading. Fortunately, Reuben Brower in the English department and

Edward Wasiolek in Comparative Literature sharpened my skills in interpretation; but basically I was being trained in a sort of fuzzy connoisseurship that meant little to me. Nevertheless, I was very happy at Harvard because I was getting what I needed from two great teachers of math and philosophy. The legendary Andrew Gleason taught a famously difficult two-year introductory math sequence that took you from the theory of limits through elementary analysis to the calculus on manifolds and differential geometry. I remember one test that I was sure I had failed; incredibly, it came back with the grade of A; when I asked my section man, William Waterhouse — soon to be famous himself — how that was possible, he said: “You got part of one of the problems right.” Gleason’s signature presentation of the material, which was almost fanatically precise and almost painfully clear and explicit, was sometimes understood by the engineers in the class as pedantic; but of course it was the very essence of formal and Formalist mathematics. I still think that Stokes’ Theorem is one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen; merely to understand it was a great exaltation. The other teacher was the legendary Rogers Albritton, whose Wittgenstein course I managed to take twice — one of the really useful things I learned at Harvard was how to circumvent the rules. Albritton had a way of being tortured in public by his own scrupulousness that my friends and I found very brave and touching. At that period his entire published work consisted, if I remember correctly, in one article entitled “On Wittgenstein’s Use of the Word ‘Criterion’”; and both times that I took the course he devoted one lecture to refuting it. I’ve never known how to interpret the fact that I got a B+ the first year and a B+ the second year. At any rate, Albritton introduced me to analytic philosophy, which was not indigenous to the German method. I wouldn’t have done my much later work on the theme-and-variations form without the example of his dramatic brooding on Wittgenstein’s family resemblances; as a teacher, I was always appropriating his accents and characteristic turns of phrase when I tried to think a problem through in real time.

So the upshot was that I majored in German, but struggled to invent critical projects that favored at least some of the rigor and formal beauty that were more typical of mathematics and analytic philosophy. Projects of that kind turned out to be possible; and the culmination of my undergraduate efforts, the senior thesis on “Childhood in Kafka’s Hunger-Artist Stories,” fairly succeeded in clarifying the structure and logic of four small-scale performative masterpieces that had been subjected by the critics to much irresponsible allegorizing and biographical or theological denaturing. The thesis benefited greatly from the wisdom and kindness of my adviser, Robert Spaethling, who insisted on a modicum of scholarly decorum but basically allowed me to omit what I wanted to omit. I did no research on the history of childhood and consulted no Austro-Hungarian manuals on parenting, if there were any. The stories themselves give all the guidance you need in determining the pertinent meanings of childhood. Nor did I quote Kafka’s letters and diaries when they touched upon his own empirical childhood. I confined myself to analyzing the text with a minimal set of clean

categories derived from the text. The result was not exactly New Criticism, which I did find congenial; and I hadn't yet discovered the Russian Formalist critics, especially Shklovsky and Tynyanov, whose work I later admired and taught. It was a brand of homemade Structuralism that satisfied me and was obviously useful, no matter where you stood on the critical spectrum. I'm glad I looked at the thing again when preparing today's talk; I had forgotten that one of the readers commented: "Excellent as the thesis is, it somehow resembles a torso." That's exactly right – it didn't need any appendages; the reader ought to have considered that torsos are, as we say nowadays, positively valorized in modern German literature (see Rilke). And I had forgotten that the thesis was awarded the comical grade of "*summa cum laude minus*"; that's been my predicate in many later evaluations.

There was another intellectual dimension to my senior year at Harvard: my English tutor, Forrest Robinson, noticed that I was writing my own poetry and volunteered to read it. At that time Forrest was preparing a commentary on Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* as his doctoral thesis; later he moved to Santa Cruz and became a well-known expert on Mark Twain. I wasn't really supposed to have an English tutor, but Forrest took me on with a few other students who wanted to read Joyce's *Ulysses*. Most Sunday mornings we laughed and puzzled our way through one, or maybe half of one, of the eighteen chapters; I got to know the book well and conquered my fear of it. Forrest threw spectacular parties that featured folksongs and folk songs – he played twelve-string guitar and commanded the entire repertoire of Gordon Lightfoot – as well as readings from *I.F. Stone's Weekly* and the consumption of cognitively stimulating intoxicants. (The year was 1967–68.) I was dumbfounded at one of these parties when, at the height of the action, Forrest pulled a poem of mine out of the back pocket of his impeccable Levi's and read it aloud expertly to the assembled company as an entertainment. I felt myself to be solemnly entering English literature. I had previously won a few small poetry prizes with decently executed English imitations of Rilke and George, but now I was seizing my own means of production. In my academic work I would henceforth be able to ask sharper questions because I could see the process of production from both sides.

Senior year was complicated by two practical problems: I had to be accepted by a graduate program that I found acceptable, and I had to save my life by convincing the U.S. Army that it didn't need me for the pointless war in Vietnam. The first was easier: Yale Comparative Literature made me a generous offer, and Yale was at the time arguably the best place in the world to study European literature, which is what Comp Lit was at the time. When I arrived in New Haven in the fall of 1968, I missed Cambridge, Massachusetts, badly for a while but got over it. Yale stood for high quality without the continual obnoxious self-congratulation of Harvard; lamentably, this difference between the two universities has now disappeared. I wasn't on the lookout for a new critical method at Yale; I thought I more or less knew what I was doing. I wanted some breadth of education in literature, and conveniently I was required to get it.

I'll mention some of the memorable lectures and seminars I attended: (1) Eric Havelock on Vergil. In later years I made a specialty of teaching the *Aeneid* in Directed Studies; I wrote my lectures with constant reference to Havelock's mimeographed handout on the myriad correspondences between the two halves of the poem, although the ink was by then in places nearly invisible. (2) Erich Segal on Latin Elegy (that is, Latin love poetry in elegiac meter). Believe it or not, the author of *Love Story* was very entertaining and insightful on Propertius. I functioned as a sort of teaching assistant for Erich and led the sessions on Latin versification for undergraduates in the course; in theory I knew the subject well, but I actually "learned it when I had to teach it" — a sentence you'll hear from everybody who ever taught in a college. (3) Thomas Greene on Rabelais, Erasmus, and many other Renaissance writers including Maurice Scève, who was important to me. I worked very hard on the six papers I wrote for this year-long course but, with one exception, couldn't really please Tom. He gave me the grade of Honors on the Scève paper only. In later years, when we were colleagues, he often introduced me to important visitors by recalling my "brilliant" Scève paper, especially the fluent English translations of three poems from the *Délie* that I had appended — actually in desperation; he didn't remember or pretended not to remember the other papers, and he spoke of me as one of his outstanding former students, which was simply false. I was very grateful and learned something about the value of selective forgetting, in its benevolent aspect. (4) Lowry Nelson on Baroque Poetry and Drama. There was a certain randomness to Lowry's seminars, but they required me to read some great poets toward whom I'd previously felt no inclination, in particular George Herbert, who would later supply me with many striking examples for my course on "Problems of Lyric." Lowry also encouraged me to read the pertinent works of Yale English professors with whom I hadn't managed to take a course: Louis Martz on the Metaphysical poets, W.K. Wimsatt on the logic and counterlogic of verse, and later John Hollander on all aspects of technique. What I remember best about Lowry was his joy in sharing, outside of class, a variety of large and small discoveries: he played me the transfixing performance of Couperin's *Leçons de Ténèbres* by the French tenor Hugues Cuénod; he drew my attention to the punctuation of the (not motto, but rather) declarative sentence on the gate of the Grove Street Cemetery: "THE DEAD SHALL BE RAISED."; and he taught me that you can pleasantly surprise your dinner guests by adding Red Bliss potatoes to a green salad. (5) Geoffrey Hartman on Blake and Hölderlin, then on Wordsworth. Hartman was the cat's pajamas for me and many other students. In college I had read his first book, *Unmediated Vision*, with its famously difficult essays on Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valéry. I gather that students don't read the book nowadays, but I read it every year or two for its extraordinary sensitivity to the texture of language and its deep understanding of the metaphysical issues at stake in the poems. As for Wordsworth, all the literature students at Yale used to laugh at the bio-blurb that identified Hartman as "the author of *Wordsworth's Poetry*"; and the point of the joke was the interesting sense in which, for my generation, he *was* the

author. At any rate, Hartman's Comp Lit seminar was a challenge and a delight—a challenge because it took me a long time and a great effort of patience to see the coherence of Blake's rather messy epics; a delight because an Anglo-American approach to Hölderlin as a Romantic poet, without constant reference to the chastening shadow of Goethe, was very refreshing. Shortly after I studied with him, Hartman announced his intention to go, as the book was entitled, "beyond Formalism." I had no wish to accompany him on that journey. (6) Martin Price on the Nineteenth-Century Novel. For me, as a reader and memorizer of lyric poetry, reading six or eight novels like *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina* in one semester was nearly impossible, and I'm fairly sure I didn't accomplish it. But the problem was not just time: I lack a deep interest in the contingency of human affairs. My way of dealing with contingency is to keep good notebooks and live long enough to be able to combine contingencies from different times and places into emotionally satisfying patterns. Fortunately, Martin Price was amiable and easygoing enough to accept a paper on the figure of Saint Theresa in the two-page "Prelude" to *Middlemarch*. That's an important document, though, in the history of the novel, and eventually it led me to a moderate interest in the theory of the novel and some serious work on Formalist narrative theory in general. (7) Peter Demetz on Lessing, then on Brecht. These were the best seminars I took at Yale or anywhere, managing to combine textual analysis, dramatic theory, and history of the German stage in a way that satisfied everybody. I used much of the material later in teaching both writers, but the most important thing I learned from Demetz was how to teach seminars in general: how to assign reports, how to tease the resulting reports into advancing an argument, and how to reject nonsense with a firmness well short of cruelty. Demetz became my doctor father, as we say in German. He's had a long productive life, and he's still going; my 2012 paper on Rilke's *Neue Gedichte* was first presented at a symposium on the occasion of his 90th birthday.

In 1970–71 I studied for my oral exam, passed it, resolved to keep the beard I'd grown in ten months of studious isolation, and left for Frankfurt am Main on a German Academic Exchange fellowship. I'll tell one story about the exam for the sake of its absurdity. In addition to topics derived from the courses I've mentioned I had decided to be examined on Biblical wisdom literature, which would increase my languages to five. Since I'd never studied Hebrew on the university level, I took pains to solidify my philology; in particular, I studied the modern commentaries on the Book of Job, some of which is written in Aramaic and some in a very ancient language similar to Hebrew but not identical with it. I went so far as to review the recent discoveries in Ugaritic, another Northwest Semitic language that could be used to shed light on the many hapax legomena in Job—the obscure words that appear only once in the corpus. I spent as much time on Job and Proverbs as on all the other topics combined; I was prepared. When we came to Wisdom Literature late in the exam, Geoffrey Hartman asked me: "What language is Job written in?" I began my answer with "I'm of three minds on this question"—and he stopped me right there: "That's good; that's enough."

How would you translate the word *Shekhinah*?" I said: "The dwelling of the Holy Spirit," and he was happy; that was the end of my forty-five-second examination in Biblical Hebrew.

In the fall I left for Germany. I was now twenty-four, had earned an M.Phil. in European comparative literature, and had not stood on European ground since I boarded the *S.S. Marine Jumper* in Bremerhaven in 1948, at the age of eight months. I simply hadn't had the money to travel. My plan was to write a dissertation on the poet Paul Celan, possibly using archival materials at his final publishing house, Suhrkamp—that at least was the excuse for my fellowship; in truth, like all non-native speakers preparing to teach a foreign language, I mostly just needed to spend time in the country in order to perfect my colloquial and academic German. There were four professors and four thousand students in Germanistik in Frankfurt; I had been told at Yale that I'd be lucky even to hear a professor, let alone be admitted to a *Hauptseminar*—an advanced seminar not taught by one of the professor's assistants or somebody else waiting around for one of the very few professorships to open up. (I already knew that the complicated streetcar crossing in front of the University of Munich was popularly called "Dozentenhoffnung" — something like "last chance for junior faculty.") But I *was* lucky, very lucky. In my first week I stumbled into the office hours of a youngish professor named Siegfried Sudhof, whose name I had encountered in connection with Goethe, but who was better known for his work on Annette von Droste-Hülshoff and the Circle of Münster. Here I learned what the name Yale can do for you. Sudhof was a humane and approachable person to begin with; but hearing that I had come from Demetz at Yale, he treated me as an internationally distinguished visiting scholar, which I certainly wasn't. Soon I joined his doctoral colloquium, where eventually I presented my Celan material as it slowly progressed. The colloquium met every other week at Siegfried's house in the Taunus hills, and I got to know the whole family: his wife, Ursula, a city librarian, and the four children, aged seven to twelve. When I mentioned to our colleague at the Koerner Center Donald Brown that I was about to write my *Intellectual Trajectory*, he said: "Don't forget to tell us how you met your wife"; so I'm doing that. Thirty-five years later I married Margaretha Sudhof, the eldest daughter, after both of us had dissolved our first marriages. She's now a high official of the Berlin State government. Since 2003 I've been living about half the year in Berlin, and the Sudhofs are my German family. I wrote a retrospective poem in 2015 on the occasion of Ursula's eightieth birthday. To my immense satisfaction, Margaretha's eldest son, Henry, married Carolina Malagón, the best Germanistik student I had in thirty-five years of teaching at Yale. Sadly, Siegfried himself died in a tragic accident in 1980.

To return to 1971: I need to mention the difficulties of being an American abroad during the Vietnam War, and I'll tell the story of my rescue by Alfred Karnein as an example. The only German course I took in Frankfurt beside the doctoral colloquium was Alfred Karnein's large seminar on comparative German and English syntax. In

the 1950s and '60s there had been a revolution in the study of German syntax associated with the linguists Erben and Glinz, who took a cold hard look at the structure of the German verb without the prejudices of a Latin humanist. I had never heard of it before, but understood its superiority as a descriptive system and a pedagogical tool as soon as Karnein explained it. (When I returned to the States I found it incorporated into the brilliant German textbook by Lohnes and Strothmann, which I then used for forty years, until I was the last teacher using it anywhere.) As my contribution to the seminar I joined forces with an Australian woman to write and present some contrasting material from English. The Australian part of the session went well, but two minutes into my remarks a rank of demonstrators arose in the theater. They brandished placards denouncing American imperialism and shouted me down as a speaker of a bastardized American lingo incomprehensible to students of proper English (Australian was apparently acceptable). I was stunned, but Karnein arose without hesitation and discharged a volley of vituperative profanity as astonishing as it was effective. "You shitheads, you wouldn't recognize the Queen's English if it came up and bit you on the arse! Quote me one line of Shakespeare, you slackers!" and so on, in the German equivalent phrases. He literally chased them out of the theater, and I was able to continue, somewhat shaken but exhilarated. Of course Karnein became one of my heroes, and I told the anecdote a thousand times in later life. But the anecdote has a sobering epilogue. About forty years later I recounted it to a woman professor who had studied in Frankfurt ten years after my time there, and she complained bitterly about Karnein's hostile treatment of women in the field and the obstacles he put in the way of their advancement. Her stories were as vivid as mine, but completely negative. I was saddened and forced to reflect on how many aspects each of us presents to the world, how fervently we hope that the benevolent ones will outweigh and make forgotten the malevolent ones.

For Siegfried's colloquium I was working on performative language in poetry, a subject derived in my case from J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* and W. K. Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon*, soon to be supplemented by the great essay "In Search of Verbal Mimesis." Nothing of that kind had yet been digested by the German universities, but Siegfried was enthusiastic and encouraging. So I had every opportunity to do what I was supposed to be doing; nevertheless, as both earlier and later in my life, I spent most of my time doing what I wasn't supposed to be doing—at this point music. I bought a flute, found two excellent flute teachers, and (to quote a poem I wrote much later) "noodled my way through Quantz, Telemann, and the easier bits / of J. S. Bach ... progressing by starts and fits." I also took music courses at the university—most memorably a seminar on Alban Berg offered by the prodigious Peter Cahn, for which I wrote a paper on the *Four Songs*, Opus 2. Cahn was the sort of musician who could take the complete score of *Lulu* to the piano and play a spontaneous reduction while singing the part of Dr. Schön. (I'm not making this up; and, mind you, he was a *violinist*.) What did I think I was up to? Well, I wasn't becoming a musician, but I

needed to observe articulate brainy musicians as they figured music out from a technical perspective, because I wanted to do something similar with poetry. And of course I loved music more than anything else in the world.

It was a wonderful, magical time. I wrote about it recently in the Glenn Gould poem, which goes into much more detail about my musical discoveries and adventures. In the spring of '72 Siegfried proposed that I stay another year; I hadn't known such a thing was possible, but he simply called Bad Godesberg in my presence and made the arrangements. In the middle of the second year the Yale German department wrote to offer me a section of Elementary German as my teacher training. By that point there had already been some talk of my officially moving to Frankfurt for my degree, with the likely prospect of becoming Siegfried's assistant; but for various reasons I thought it better to go home. Of course Margaretha and I amuse ourselves by speculating on the counterfactual.

Back in New Haven I entered a rather confused period of my life. The dissertation bogged down, mostly because I'd reached the later poetry of Celan and I didn't understand it well. Instead of forcing my way through or altering the topic, I overflowed into my adjacent areas: for a while I got very serious about the flute; I had exhibitions of paper collage in the Sterling Library and at Wesleyan University; I published some poems in *New Directions*. I enjoyed being a little art factory, but I didn't know where I was headed. In the late summer of '76 I was saved from confusion (and maybe also from the most creative period of my life) by Bart Giamatti, who was then my director of graduate studies. The Princeton German department had developed a sudden vacancy for September and had inquired about the available ABD [all-but-dissertation] graduate students at Yale; Bart told me to pack my bags, and I did.

As a lecturer at Princeton I came under the benevolent influence of Stanley Corngold, professor of German and comparative literature, a Kafka expert, who became a close friend and something like a professional mentor. Circumstances at Princeton were close to ideal: a brilliant faculty, an affordable faculty club, excellent students in German, and a lovely small town to live in. I soon came to the conclusion that one could lead a very pleasant life in the academic profession and that I'd better do what was required for remaining in it, namely finish a dissertation. I pulled myself together, decided to give up working on Celan, published what I had managed to write on Celan, and turned to a new topic. Fortunately there *was* a new topic ready to go: for about two years, on the side, I'd been writing a little technical commentary on some related passages in Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street* and *Berlin Childhood around 1900*; I suddenly realized that this project could be turned very quickly into a dissertation that shuttled between structural analysis and theoretical heuristics. Demetz was willing to give me another chance; and so, in my second year at Princeton, while teaching three courses a term, I wrote *Gegenbild, Reihenfolge, Sprung: An Essay on Related Figures of Argument in Walter Benjamin*, which in more than one respect stands at the center of my life to date.

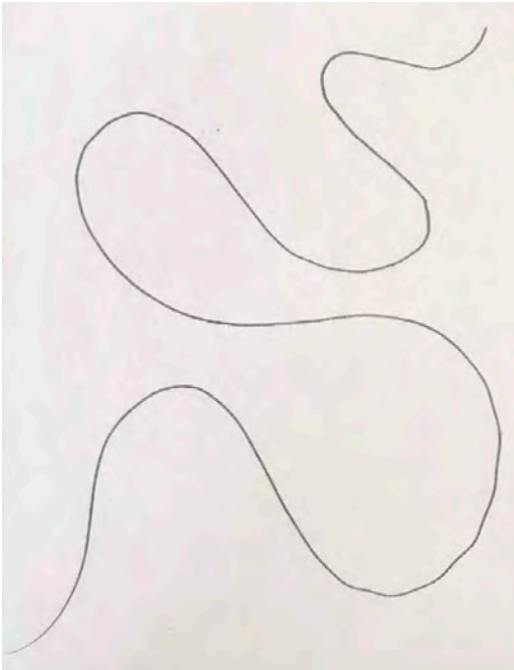


Fig. 1. Sinuous line illustrating “the power of a country road”

I won't move into lecture mode now, I promise you; but I do need to tell you something about this book, in order to make it clear what sort of formalism I practice and why I've remained faithful to formalism when most of my colleagues have given it up for cultural studies or some such enterprise. Please look at the sinuous line that I've drawn to illustrate the passage from *One-Way Street* about “the power of a country road” (fig. 1). Here's the passage:

The power of a country road is different when one is walking along it from when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text is different when it is read from when it is copied out. The airplane passenger sees only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front. Only the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text, that road that cuts through the interior jungle forever closing behind it: because the reader follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of daydreaming, whereas the copier submits it to command. The Chinese practice of copying books was thus an incomparable guarantee of literary culture, and the transcript a key to China's enigmas [trans. Edmund Jephcott].

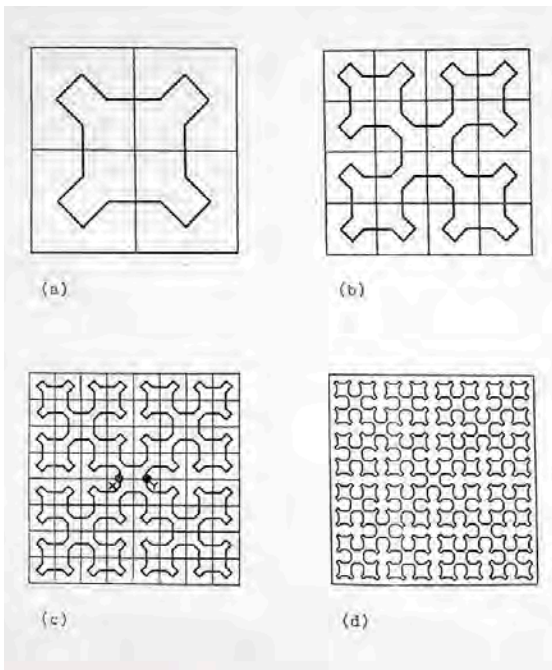


Fig. 2. Sierpiński's area-filling line

This country road is one of Benjamin's master figures. When you walk the road, you have no overview that would allow you at once to understand unambiguously the spatial relations among the various features of the landscape: the lake, the rock, the castle. You glimpse these features multiple times and lose sight of them multiple times; confusingly, they're now close and now far and now close again; they're seen paradoxically from multiple angles and elevations. Such an experience of the landscape is compared to the scribal copying of a Chinese text, as opposed to the reader's reading it. So here's Benjamin the antiquarian, indulging his nostalgia for premodern, indeed ancient, technology. When you come to study Benjamin's later essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," you may not notice (but it's my job to point out) that what Benjamin praises there as the progressive technique of the new film medium shows exactly the same structure: you get multiple discontinuous shots, close-ups and totals, paradoxical changes of perspective, flashbacks and anticipations, and so forth. Structurally, it's the same road, and there are many more appearances of it in Benjamin. It underlies Benjamin's image of the continuous and discontinuous, progressive and reactionary, dialectical forward movement of history in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Sometimes the road becomes densely anfractuous, like Sierpiński's famous one-dimensional line that fills a two-dimensional area (fig. 2) – an ancestor of today's fractal geometry and a good illustration of what Benjamin is driving at when he claims that in the literary form of the tractatus (with numbered propositions) there is no difference between thematic and excursive exposition: "thematic" means the area and "excursive" means the line. Sometimes, as in the

writings “On Haschisch,” the road is disguised as the symmetrical pattern of Arabian geometric ornament (fig. 3) or as the Cretan labyrinth. If you treated all this material thematically, your book on the multifaceted Benjamin would contain separate chapters on the Orientalist, the pioneer of media theory, the Marxist ideologue, the philosopher of history, the speculative Jewish theologian. You’d be missing the point that Benjamin was developing a highly original non-Hegelian alternative to the orthodox Marxist dialectic—an alternative that reveals astonishing connections, paradoxical affinities, formal mathematical symmetries between disparate historical objects that themselves, in the recursive manner of fractal geometry, are tiny models of the entire system. Furthermore, the system is not just a fascinating picture; it was Benjamin’s chief heuristic instrument for generating new ideas in both his literary works and his critical/philosophical works. That’s what I wrote about in my Benjamin dissertation, the title of which I can now translate for you: “Gegenbild” means the symmetrically opposite image; “Reihenfolge,” literally “sequence,” means the excursive ornamental line that connects the images; and “Sprung,” literally “leap” or “jump,” means the revolutionary or Messianic intervention that has the power to disrupt the continuity of images and redeem human history in its totality.

So, with doctorate in hand, I reluctantly said farewell to Princeton and took up an assistant professorship in the Columbia German department. I taught there for three horrible years, about which I intend to remember nothing except that I then learned Ancient Greek from James Coulter, whom I admired for being simultaneously full professor of classics and teacher of elementary Greek. In the summer of ’82 I moved back to friendly New Haven without an official job, picked up some teaching and very unlucrative work as a translator, and considered my options.

Now I come to those connected developments that unexpectedly redirected my academic career. The first is that my dissertation was published as a little book and began to collect reviews that were mostly negative. I had naively forgotten that, given the division of academic labor, my book would land on the desks of humorless Marxists who were impatient of beautiful images. I was proud of the book and had no intention of reforming my method, which I began to think of as Bourgeois Formalism, since I’d been handed a train ticket to Siberia. But it was unclear how to proceed. At this point the Yale German department advertised an assistant professorship and I applied for it. Directing the search committee was Cyrus Hamlin, already a friend and soon to be a congenial collaborator, I teaching the undergraduates enough classic German to read Goethe and he reading Goethe with them. Cyrus put the case to me earnestly that I didn’t really want the job. Certainly the department was eager to retain me, but retain me for the long term. As an advanced assistant professor I’d be around for three more years and then fail to get tenure: in literature very few junior people were tenured internally at Yale at that time—he himself hadn’t been. And besides, I was more of a poet and literary type than a scholar. The correct move, since I spoke good German and was undeniably well educated in the Great Books, was to be appointed a senior lector in

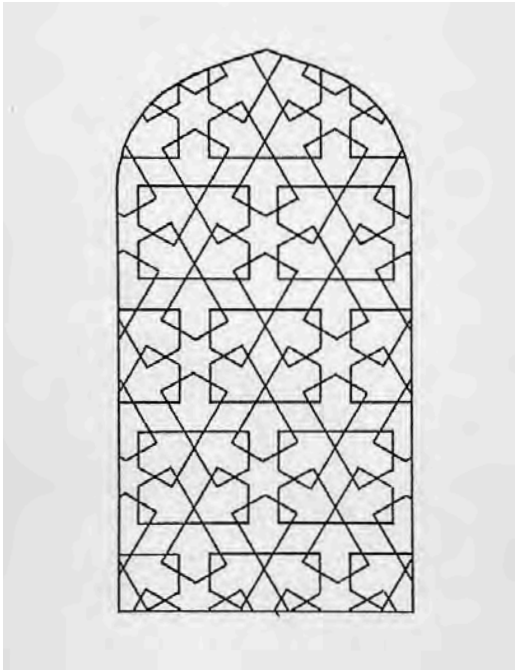


Fig. 3. Ornamental window of a fourteenth-century mosque

German and be assigned half-time to the program in Directed Studies. True, I would have to be reappointed every three years, but I would be, indefinitely. I would have wonderful students and dwell among friends. What could I say?—he was obviously right. And there was an additional factor that reinforced his argument: I'd recently received the diagnosis of severe late-onset Crohn's disease. I'd already been hospitalized once for a month and could foresee that the disease would be draining much of my energy and stamina in the future; there wouldn't be enough left for clawing my way to the top in academia. I accepted the proposal, and it became a blessing to me.

Cyrus's prediction turned out to be accurate. For the next thirty-three years I taught Yale's version of Plato to NATO (more accurately described as Homer to Virginia Woolf), Intensive German (a double course), the survey of German literature, German Poetry in Performance, The Language of Nineteenth-Century Narrative (popularly known as German as a Dead Language), Reading Yiddish, and my two specialty courses for the Literature major: a technical introduction to lyric poetry (mostly in English) called Problems of Lyric and a senior seminar called The Prose Labyrinth, on collections of short prose in five or six languages that resemble Benjamin's *One-Way Street*. (I should say a word about the Yiddish project. The decade from 1985 to '95 was the Slavic period of my life, under the tutelage of my first wife, Susanne Fusso, professor of Russian at Wesleyan and a first-rate Slavic philologist. I learned some Russian and read my way into the Russian Formalists, as well as Russian poetry to some extent. One unexpected consequence of this adventure was a renewed interest in Yiddish, my more-or-less native tongue, which I came to rediscover from a

linguistic viewpoint as a heavily Slavicized Germanic language – with of course a large quotational component of Hebrew-Aramaic. The Slavic-like aspectual system of the Yiddish verb became one of my well-known hobbyhorses.) Most of my teaching has been on the elementary level in both language and literature; the material would be open in principle to the older students in a good high school or Gymnasium. That’s been fine with me. In the first place, I sleep soundly for knowing that my work has been socially useful: we want our children to have some basic knowledge and appreciation of the historical high culture and to learn a language or two really well; I’m happy to be of service if the high schools don’t provide this general education in the arts and humanities, and they don’t. In fact, I sometimes feel that the passionate intensity I brought to teaching the Classics and the Bible was simply the verso of my adult revulsion at how these subjects were taught to me as a schoolboy: without questioning, without concern for meaning, without proper respect for the imaginative capabilities of young people. Secondly, I discovered that almost everything I aspired to do in literature and literary theory could be done on the introductory level. The relationship between Homer and Vergil is the greatest labyrinthine structure in European literature, and a beginner can be made to see this. Where but in Second-Year German could I have spent twenty hours on a single story of Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, combining for students a rigorous workout in nineteenth-century syntactic structures with a micro-analysis of narrative technique and intertextuality? I could give many such examples. Thirdly, I discovered that elementary language courses afford an excellent opportunity to teach young people how to learn any complicated subject that requires the organization and internalization of a large mass of material, and how to think clearly about almost anything.

Let me give a tiny example of this last point. If you’ve learned any German, you’ll remember that the past participle of a weak verb is formed from the infinitive by dropping the suffix *-en*, then adding the prefix *ge-* and the suffix *-t*; thus the infinitive *hören*, “to hear,” yields the participle *gehört*. If, however, the infinitive already contains an inseparable prefix, like *ver-* or *miss-*, you don’t add *ge-*; thus the infinitive *verhören*, “to interrogate,” yields the participle *verhört*. Now here’s the point: if you give beginning students the participle *gehört* and ask them to work backwards to the infinitive, most of them will quickly produce *hören*. Few of them will remember that *ge-* is itself an inseparable prefix and conclude that *gehört* is the participle of both *hören* and *gehören*, “to belong.” The system is not one-to-one. A tiny example; but I’m convinced that most of the world’s sludge results from elementary mistakes in thinking just like that one. And so I became a teacher of a subject I call “mental hygiene.” I’m proud of the fact that some of my German students had little intrinsic interest in German but had been told by other students that German 125 would teach them something about language in general and something about poetry and would permanently improve their mental hygiene. Ask any professor of law or computer science if he or she knows what I’m talking about. Needless to say, language courses like mine have now been eliminated under the new rubric of “Cultural Competence.”

Today I'm very pleased to have retired into the supportive and stimulating atmosphere of the Koerner Center. I've spent a great deal of my energy in the last forty years working with students in and out of the classroom; I need to step back and write more poetry, to publish more of the poetry I've already written and have been reading to audiences mostly in American and German universities, and to finish some critical projects that have been percolating for a long time. I'll close by outlining one of these. The poetry of Rilke has accompanied me through life since my freshman year at Harvard; I still use the copy of the poems that I bought back then at Schoenhof's Foreign Books. In 1982 I finally made some progress on the *New Poems* and published, in tribute to René Wellek, founder of the Yale Comp Lit department, a little article on paradoxes of representation in the poem "Persian Heliotrope." Recently, while doing some guest teaching in Berlin and Dresden, I made progress again and wrote, in tribute to Peter Demetz, the paper I've already mentioned that uses group theory to attack the problem of representation in the very difficult Apollo poems. I think I can now see the third chapter of what would be a nice little Rilke monograph; I intend to write it. And maybe return to playing the flute. Thank you.

265

UPDATE 2020: Margaretha Sudhof is now state secretary in the Federal Ministry of Justice, and I've started to relearn the flute.