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Ilit Ferber_ Lament as a *Wiederholungsfigur*

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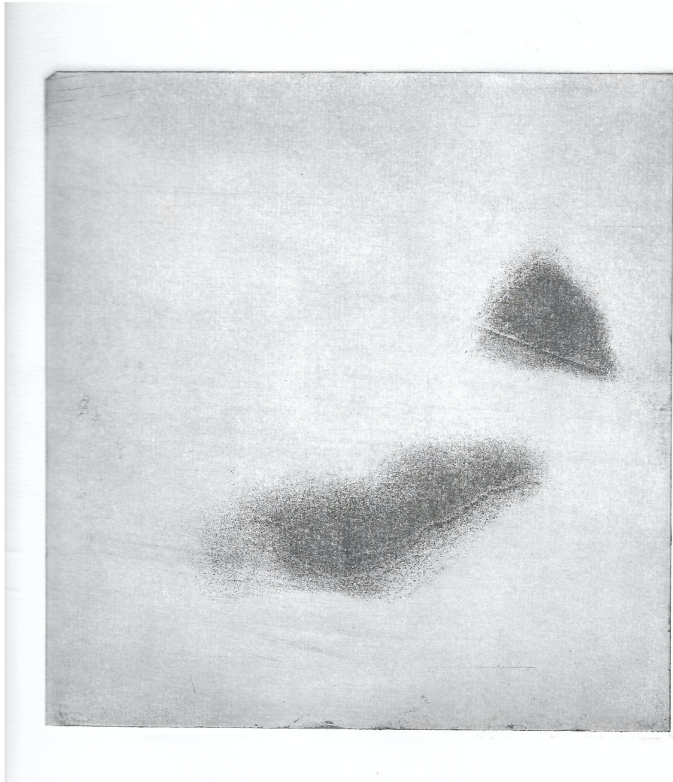


Image: "Sadness", Etching 2001, by Ilit Ferber

Lament as a *Wiederholungsfigur*

I understand Scholem's curious statement about lament being "an eternal truth [*ewige Wahrheit*]" (Scholem, *Tagebücher* Band II, 149), to mean that lament's power lies in the endless challenge it poses to the very borders of language—a challenge that undermines language's positivity as well as its capacity for articulation. In the metaphysics of language that Scholem attempts to formulate in his "Klage und Klagelied," lament is the only form of expression sufficiently powerful to manifest, sometimes brutally, the borders of language, the site from which alone we can touch the truth inherent in language. Yet, lament is also the only form of expression to pay the heavy cost incurred by disclosing language's limits—namely, its own conditions of possibility and impossibility. For Scholem, lament, in explicitly and implicitly challenging its own linguistic structure, intimates its own demise. Scholem consequently describes lament as an extremely forceful and active form of expression. In what he characterizes as the anarchic nature of lament's "linguistic autonomy" (Ibid., 131), he portrays lament as "re-experiencing" and reconstructing its own failure to go beyond the borders of language, a movement Sigrid Weigel

portrays as *Wiederholungsfigur*, emphasizing the repetitive, desperate movement of lament as an eternal linguistic cycle to which there is no possible closure (Weigel, “Scholem’s Gedichte und seine Dichtungstheorie,” 30). This movement is nothing less than a performative act manifesting a fundamental, deep linguistic death wish.

What Scholem’s topographical metaphor of lament as being the language on, and of the border between revelation and silence manifest, is that lament’s eternal liminal presence creates a space in which no signified content is communicated and no dialogue is possible—a space of linguistic purity. In the case of language, language “as such” is revealed only when it slips out of its communicative, subjective, and propositional mode. Language materializes in moments of crisis, moments when everything external to it disappears, when it becomes completely empty, when it is laid bare. Such moments are not, however, subjective plights but purely *linguistic* moments. They express nothing other than language itself. This is the productive, even positive, facet of lament: precisely in being denied any linguistic content or determination, it brings to light language’s own conditions of possibility, what Benjamin terms pure language as such. These are the qualities that, for Scholem, craft lament as “an eternal truth [*ewige Wahrheit*].”

*These paragraphs were previously published (with some changes) in Ilit Ferber, “A Language of the Border: On Scholem’s Theory of Lament,” *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 21 (2013), 161–186.

References

Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, ed. Karlfried Gründer et al., 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995–2000).

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