



George A. Smathers Libraries  
Public Services Division/ Access Services  
Interlibrary Loan

245 Library West  
PO Box 117001  
Gainesville, FL 32611-7001  
352-273-2535  
352-392-7598 Fax  
[illiad.uflib.ufl.edu/illiad/ill.html](http://illiad.uflib.ufl.edu/illiad/ill.html)

## Electronic Delivery Cover Sheet

If you receive a copy that is missing pages, smudged or unreadable, please contact the UF ILL Office so we may obtain a clean copy for you as quickly as possible.

### NOTICE WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs that making a photocopy or other reproductions of copyrighted materials. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproductions. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of fair use, that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

This notice is posted in compliance with  
Title 37 C.F.R., Chapter II, Part 201.14

## Chapter Six

# Remarks on Complaint

### 1) COMPLAINING

We complain about everything, about personal and communal misfortune, about the general state of the world and the course of history, about the outcome of elections and the weather, about indispositions, illnesses, wars, about maliciousness and evil, about the fact that others—and we ourselves—complain. We complain about “everything under the sun.” There is hardly a more common and intelligible form of speech than complaint. And yet complaints, unguarded revelations of oneself that they are, constantly face the threat of being dismissed, whether in the form of a complaint about complaining or through ridicule, irony, deliberate indifference, or awkward silence—and it should give us pause that irony, sarcasm, even humor, and often remaining or falling silent can be ways of complaining. Complaining is unquestionably, if also lamentably, one of the forms in which we relate to one another. Yet it is one of our strangest ways of relating, for in certain spheres, conventions justify and even impose it, in others make it taboo, but it is structured in such a way that an answer to it is not always desired and for the most part seems impossible. The irritation that comes from complaining can perhaps be seen most clearly from the fact that we have countless versions and registers of complaint but we very seldom talk *about* complaining. Perhaps this reticence in the face of this everyday and yet extreme phenomenon can be at least partly explained by the fact that every analytic discourse about complaining easily gives the impression that it is a continuation of complaining in disguise.

To make clear and interpretable the embarrassment of those who hear and seek answers to complaining, we do well to consider not only the easily, all too easily, pathologizable forms complaining can take, not only the chronic

gripping and grumbling that go along with a certain compulsive negativity—and which in our societies is professionalized with astonishing ease as a “critical” attitude—not only, therefore, what are pejoratively called “jeremiads” and which have a very long artistic, ritual, and religious tradition that plays a part in defining our entire culture. We do well to consider not only these but also complaining as such and the “as such” of complaining, which far exceeds the borders of everyday conversation, day-to-day contacts, and attempts at communication, as well as all areas of social practice (especially of the so-called law), of political organization (which should always give an answer to the questions: Who is allowed to complain? And how?), of historical consciousness, the arts, and religions.

For there is absolutely nothing whose perfection could not be doubted, nothing whose dubiousness could not be complained about. But if there is nothing that could not also be the object of a complaint, that means that nothing can offer a firm basis for a communicative system, a firm ground for understanding each other, a universal bond among speakers, except complaining itself. But if complaining is always and everywhere possible, and if it can refer to anything, then everything is ruined by it in some vague, barely more definable way. Complaint is that language that does not allow any meaning, significance, value, interest, belief, or any of the consequences of these, to be grounded in it. Everywhere it points to deficiencies and gaps in utterances, relationships, and attitudes, to damages, mistakes, and transgressions, and it attacks them for being the cause of inadequacy, misfortune, or suffering. But it acts not merely as the complainant but also as the witness of the accusation, speaking before a court of law that in turn cannot be safe from its complaint and testimony. What is lamented and attested to by complaining is always that which does *not* work, is *not* at one’s disposal, is *not* there. The object of the complaint, therefore, is always a loss or lack, an absence, an estrangement, or a decline. The object of complaint is a ruin, and with the complaint that presents it, ruin enters into language and thus into the whole world of experience and thought, into all sociable or societal relations, into speaking- and living-together. The language of complaint is the language of a destruction that is in principle limitless.

One might therefore consider talking about complaint as the appearance of the death drive in language. For complaint, everything is empty, indifferent, over. That everything is empty and indifferent and past is the formula for the nihilism for which Nietzsche made Zarathustra his mouthpiece. In complaint, we are therefore exposed to a phenomenon that is as universal as it is uncanny, whether we want to be or merely notice—or don’t notice—it clearly, to the phenomenon of a language that can only lament itself and its loss, itself as its loss. “I’m at a loss for words,” “I’m speechless”: These phrases of lament imply that they express nothing other than the powerlessness of language; they imply, therefore, that they say nothing, and that the only lan-

guage they can lend complaint to is that of a contradictory formulaic expression. The language of complaint no more corresponds to a bad state of affairs or an incongruity than it does to the capacity for understanding of the one to whom it is directed. It is always also the complaint that it lacks an adequate addressee. In one of the most famous songs of lament in our history, Jeremiah's lamentations, we find the words, "Though I call and cry for help, / he shuts out my prayer."<sup>1</sup> The subject here is God, the addressee who absolutely cannot be missed, he whom one should be able to assume is there all the time, his ear constantly attuned to all invocations, hymns of praise, as well as lamentations. He appears to close himself off to these complaints. And as it is at the beginning of the tradition of complaint, to which we still belong *nolens volens*, so it is at its end. In one of the best-known elegies in modern literature, Rilke's first *Duino Elegy*, the opening question reads, "Who, if I cried out, would hear me then."<sup>2</sup> That is, even if I cried out, no one, presumably, would be able to hear me. Even less than I am heard when I speak, and still less when I whisper, and less again when I sigh. I talk, but this talk is not directed at someone I could assume will receive it. Complaint is therefore more or less clearly also the complaint that it cannot be heard and that it becomes a complaint in the first place in being heard. Along with its nature as complaint, it at the same time disputes its linguisticity.

Whoever complains complains about not being able to be certain *what* they are doing and *if* they are doing anything at all. Complaint is therefore an extreme, a borderline, form of language by which everyone must in some way feel spoken to, even though, or precisely because, it disputes that it can gain a hearing. But who, then, is this Everyone who must feel appealed to if nobody hears this complaint, as Jeremiah's songs and Rilke's elegies affirm? If everyone feels spoken to by the complaint to no one, then there must be in everyone the possibility of being precisely this Nobody, the one who can be affected by the destruction of language in the complaint and erased as addressee. Every complaint says, "You don't hear me. You, to whom this complaint is directed, are not there. You are not you." Yet precisely because we are spoken to in the complaint as those who are absent, we turn our attention to the complaint. We turn our attention to the possibility that we ourselves are not there, the possibility of being denied, forgotten, or destroyed. As I have indicated, that can even happen to a god—and, first among all gods, to God. In the monotheistic tradition, there are in fact lamentations in which it is God who laments—for example, the disobedience of his people or the destruction of his Temple. The scope and weight of complaint, therefore, cannot be limited in any way. Complaint traces an infinity of losses and absences. It disputes, implicitly or explicitly, through its structure or its semantic content, its ability to find an answer that would not in turn be another complaint. It does not merely deny the possibility of an answer, it contests the word as such. It is the paradigm of a language against language, of a

turning toward itself that is at the same time a turning away from itself and that, in the more than merely paradoxical connection between connection and the dissolution of all connections, discloses the constitutive deconstitutive structure of what we call its linguisticity.

The question—and the question can also be a mode of complaint—we should pose in the face of the structural traumatization of speaking is: How, nevertheless, to answer complaints? How to answer a language that rejects every answer? And how to answer, such that the complaint is not treated in a psychologizing manner as the mere symptom of an avoidable mourning sickness, as an abnormality and accident?

Since complaint has the strange ability to dispute every linguistic connection as well as the connection to itself and thus its own consistency and continuity, it also erases time. Not only is it monotonous; and not only does it, through its monotony, bring about the eternal return of the always same of complaint, which excludes any change in time. Through its monochronism it destroys time given that this time is a time of change, of the not-yet, a time of the realization of the future that has not yet been thought. Since it relates to the whole extent of time and to the possibilities opened with it, with every gesture in which it reveals itself, it leads to the borders of time and leaps out of its monochronism into anachronism. But it behaves anachronistically not only within a given, measurable time, but toward every time, not only toward time past—which can be lamented as past—but to the time to come—which, as still ahead, is lacking and therefore can also be lamented—and also toward present time, which can be hollowed out by complaint and therefore can only be void. As much as complaint is engaged in the perpetual passing of the world, therefore, as much as it turns every world into a “merely” temporal one and in such a way that it is itself the time of the linguistic world, so too is it, as this event of temporalization, also already at the utmost edge, and outside of, all time. Whatever is present, becoming, or absent is exposed by complaint to an un-time that is neither present nor to be expected, neither empty nor fulfilled, neither past nor eternal, but not time and as not time also incapable of temporal description. Complaint scans the time of the linguistic world by erasing every *is*. It insists that this time of this world cannot be predicated and that, regardless of all the possible utterances about it, it is *ineffable* in the most vehement sense of the word. It itself is first to profess this ineffability and attests to it by emphasizing its own lack of an object or addressee, its groundlessness and its futility, and in every way undermines, deforms, and destroys the formal, semantic, and pragmatic conventions of its articulation. Nothing that can be said, nothing about which an *is* can be said, would not be damaged by it. Since it denies that there could be an end to complaint and insists upon finding every limiting answer lamentable, indictable, and pitiful, for it there is no future—which means, first of all, no future of language—that would not have to be rejected by it in turn. There is no

return and no infinity of complaint that it would not have to reject. In each of its moments, therefore, complaint is on the way out of language, community, the world, and time. It runs through the movement to atrophy, anachronism, asociality, and is therefore the most sincere witness of what is *a limine* unworldly and inhuman in every language. It can only be this, however, because in itself it contests language and speech in its constitutive forms and elements and disputes the substantiality, the persistence, and thus the responsiveness of all those it addresses. It is the language of difference and of the very difference *from* language and *in* it.

Complaints do not confine themselves to presenting clearly reasoned accusations with a defined goal. Accusations as a general rule relate to circumstances that are debatable and open to question, that can become subjects of a conversation, debate, or juridical process. One can file a complaint in court for damages as defined by the legal system, but these damages are considered reparable, at least to a certain extent. In this case, the complaint is finite; the parties in dispute can “straighten things out” if they agree to social conventions and to the institutions that ensure them. That so seldom happens, however, that even after a conflict is settled, whether it was a legal dispute or a mere “difference of opinion,” the parties involved don’t stop complaining, often ever. Complaints whose scope and intensity are difficult to ascertain legally, since in addition to what is presented openly they also include unacknowledged, disavowed, hidden, and unconscious complaints and their long echo, transcend every finite accusation confined to a determinate object and circumscribable situation. The borders of complaint—always a particular case [*Fall*] or falling out [*Ausfall*]*—*are only there to be exceeded, in the particular case [*Fall*] in order to complain about the fall [*Fall*] of everything and to extend complaint infinitely: we speak disdainfully of garrulosity. No statutes or limits over complaints can stop them, for in principle they cover everything, and they always complain, about everything, that it is *not* everything, *not* whole, *not* complete, *not* there. They therefore not only come up against a not, they seek it out; they not only discover it but open it and search in it for that which, as nothing, exceeds every particular and limited lack. Even the in-finite cannot satisfy the structure of complaint, therefore; it would merely be the rejection of the borders that in the course of this rejection could always be drawn—and erased—*anew*. But complaint does not merely continue in its rejection of all particularities and delimitations; it also rejects its continuation, its continuity, its *progressus ad infinitum* precisely because it affords no saturation and thus, as absolute complaint, also *continues* the continuation of complaint and *discontinues* it. Since it must be infinite [*un-endlich*], as well as un-infinite [*un-unendlich*], it can only be this *un* and only in the ontologically incomprehensible manner of *Unbeing*. Complaint is not a potential theme of ontology.

To bring to language that which, *without* being present, nonetheless emphatically “is there”—that is the wish that drives complaint. It does not try to speak *about* nothingness, as philosophy has done since Parmenides, merely in order to exclude it from the sphere of what can be thought and said; it tries to bring *nothingness* to language, whether the particular nothingness of the person speaking or the nothingness that is barely distinguishable from this, which must accompany all speaking provided that it is speaking of what is absent. Not to say nothing, but rather to say nothingness: this is the wish that complaint pursues. Were it to succeed, then nothingness would become language—language without meaning and without object or addressee, but language and as such present, if also not unbroken. Then, however, this language would at the same time also be nothing and as such absent, although not without remainder. The work of complaint would therefore consist in laying out in a discrete sequence the impossible simultaneity of language and nothingness and in attempting, each time anew, to bring the absolutely absent into presence. Consequently, complaint would be that path to the beginning of language that, even *before* this language, leads back to a time without language. Contrary to every impression of a logical and psychic abnormality that it has long aroused, especially from formal logic and psychology, it would be the most sincere language of the beginning of language imaginable: of its beginning and event. Its greatest danger would lie in indulging in complaints about complaint, denouncing itself as futile, and thus misjudging its nature as event.

## 2) EXPRESSION

Speech act theory attempts to describe the range and structure of complaint in terms of the act, more precisely, of locutionary acts. Without entering further into the tension and even incompatibility between the concepts of act and of expression, it defines complaint as an act of expression. J. L. Austin assigns it to the group of statements of emotional reactions he calls *behabitives*.<sup>3</sup> Since acts, from the point of view of this theory, are only considered acts within an already given convention and can only take place on the condition that they follow this convention, the expression they are supposed to give an affect to is always defined as the expression of an interior that has been preformed by conventions, a feeling that can be agreed upon, and an in principle socialized language of affect. An act that does not meet these conditions cannot be “successful” or “felicitous” in Austin’s terms; as such, it is unknowable, unrecognizable, and unanswerable (12–24). Complaints *about* “infelicitous” and “unsuccessful” speech acts can of course be “felicitous” and “successful,” but only if they in turn conform to the conventions of complaint. They are only “felicitous”—socially acceptable and successful—

complaints if and when they are not complaints but agreements, if they do not break out of an established pattern of behavior but rather confirm it. Speech act theory, in short, banishes from its system both complaint and every other affect or expression of affect in order to ensure action, and it banishes action from its system in order to ensure the systematics of action, the synthesis of actions, and the prestabilized harmony between them. If, for speech act theory, action functions according to conventions, then formally it is nothing other than the confirmation of those conventions and thus, paradoxically, both an action that satisfies its universal form and a nonaction that refrains from all active influence upon its form. The term “speech act,” as it is used by speech act theory, is therefore an antonym: it describes neither an act nor a speech act but merely a mechanics of behavior according to a presupposed program of functions.

Since acts of conformity can only be “felicitous” because they are not acts at all, their definition also delimits those “infelicitous” acts excluded by speech act theory, acts that at the very least have the chance to alter the conditions of conformity under which they might become effective and thus in fact to assume the character of an act. These acts can only be undertaken independently of the norms of speech acts, in advance of them, and without regard to their fulfillment. They can therefore only be unconventional; they do not build upon any consensus; and they correspond to neither rituals nor routines. But this means that “acts of complaint” must not only be complaints without regard for being heard or having an effect, complaints without intention or addressee. They must in every sense be “infelicitous” speech acts: namely, first, speech acts that give rise to misfortune; second, that miss their intention; third, that do not conform to any rule of comprehensibility. They are too shrill, too subdued, too brutal, too desperate, not linguistic enough, or excessively active. Since they do not share a rule with the expectations attached to such expressions and thus are not assured to begin with that they will be recognized *as* complaints, they must essentially appear anomic, asocial, or anti-social. It should therefore not even be accepted as certain that they can be included in the field of language—whether a particular idiom or human language as such. Only if they are expressed absolutely without condition and without a predetermined horizon, therefore, or if they avoid being expressed, are these complaints complaints at all. They are complaints only if they undermine the parameters of their determination and thus every language by which they could be identified as what they are. That stones screech is not a poetic metaphor. That extreme emotions are expressed in an animal’s language is not a physiological discovery. That all of nature would rise up in lament if it were given language, as Benjamin writes,<sup>4</sup> is not the metaphysical hyperbole of a melancholic but rather the objective definition of the horizonlessness of what are called language and linguistic activity without conventionalistic norms of recognition. Like every speech, complaint, too,



must be capable of failure in all its dimensions—as verbalizing, thematizing, addressing, communication, and effect—if it is to be able to be complaint, linguistic “act,” language. It is only on the basis of this extreme possibility—the necessary and therefore always already operative possibility of its impossibility—that language and its extreme, complaint, can be thought.

Speech act theory’s restriction of complaint to an “expressive” act thus not only commits a methodological error, it does not do justice to the phenomenon of complaint, since it does not recognize its withdrawal into the aphenomenal as a constitutive trait of this phenomenon. We do well, then, to drop this restriction and to turn, in the analysis of complaint, to that in it which breaks through the borders of linguistic conventions, the borders of its commonality, of its place in human language, and perhaps of its linguisticality as such. To understand complaint as an act of breaking rules and even of shattering its nature as act, to understand it as anti-act and as anti-social, as anti-pact and as passion, we have to take the expression “silent complaint” seriously and relate the endless series of complaints about everything and anything to an always unvoiced, implicit, and inexpressible complaint. In the complaint that goes unexpressed is intimated that it is a complaint over language itself, an indictment of speaking, a silent revolt against talking.

If the person complaining could describe precisely what he is feeling, he wouldn’t be complaining but rather describing, comprehending, and bringing under his control the object of his complaint, ruined and ruinous though it be. Complaint, however, is not a theoretical, predicative discourse of the definition of objects and relations, but the complaint about the failure of all control over the matter and over the language that might grasp it. It is not a mere relation but rather a relation to the failure of precisely those relations that it attempts to bring about, a relation to the absence of homeostasis between inside and outside, to the lack of correspondence between what can be felt and what can be said, to the continuity that never materializes between the phases of feeling, between feeling and unfeelingness, between utterance and meaning. In each instance, it is what is denied that is lamented. But what is denied the person complaining is any kind of relation that might offer coherence and constancy, conformity and consistency. His complaint is a relation to the relationless. Complaints are therefore repeatedly judged with the ambiguous term “excessive.” They know no limits, no stopping, no borders, because they constantly refer to what is not there. But since complaint is ceaseless and limitless, it also cannot be restricted to an interior; since it is not given a “private language” of interiority that could be carried outside by being made into sound, through facial expressions or gestures, it has no interior that could be “expressed.” It is not because it cannot find an adequate medium for its utterance that complaint is devoid of expression; it is devoid of expression because it has and is nothing upon which a stable interior could be constituted and distinguished from an exterior. It is without expression

because it runs through the movement of sheer being outside-the-self—the movement, not of the separation of an inner language from an outer one, not of one world from a second one, but the movement of the separation of the world from the world, of language from language, and thus of movement itself from every movement. What takes place in complaint, in the silent or unexpressed complaint, what takes place in pain, is a tear through the world of language as a whole—and thus its opening onto *what* the world of language is not and onto the fact *that* it “is” not.

Complaint is in the extreme unexpressed, unarticulated, and silent, because it is the movement back *before* a world of language, before a common, consistent, physical and mental world into a relation to what has no hold, in which nothing can be understood any longer except the fact that it “is there,” without it being a something and without this “that” presenting itself as anything other than the withdrawal of every possibility of a statement of existence. At its most extreme, and thus through and through, complaint is the language of the refusal of language. This is why it can be described as the event of the separation and departure from itself as language and as complaint. Since the tear that is opened with it constitutes the fundamental event of what is called language, it becomes clear from it that language is not merely an open structure made up of namings and utterances, indicative acts and their modifications, agreements and contestations, but rather, first of all—and therefore, if still imperceptibly, in every way—an experience with being-without-language and being-without-world, with aphasia and aphani-sis. Complaint, and thus language as a whole, is *mutation*: movement with its silencing. Since it is this silencing in which it divides itself and communicates with the other, it is *com-mutation* before and in every communication.

The community of those who speak is always also the community of those who do not speak with one another: who are able not to speak, do not need to speak, who say nothing, are quiet or remain silent. Just as their language is not without pauses or silent areas, so too their shared talking and talking with one another repeatedly breaks off and makes room for that which is not—at least not manifestly—language. This does not mean that falling silent and muteness are social phenomena that are the same as, or even merely comparable to, talking and the segments of it that are delimited by pauses. This is so far from the case that even minimal expansions in these pauses, silent fermata, or increases in the interval between the utterances of different speakers can suggest the possibility of complete absences, of an inability to speak, and of the loss of the world. Even the most coherent representations in language—and perhaps precisely these—can be walls around something unsaid, about which one can’t say whether it is a meaningful silence or a meaningless muteness. The pauses constitutive for every communication occupy the threshold between talk that communicates—for they can be interpreted as irony, as a manifestation of doubt, or as com-

plaint—and an absence of communication in which one does not fall silent with and for others, since there is no relation to others in it, but only a relation to another as other, to an un-other and its muteness, a relation to what is incapable of relation. Complaint occupies this threshold when it is a complaint about not being heard, not being able to reach an addressee, not speaking a common language with others and therefore not being capable of either silence or communication.

A remark by Hegel about the connection between lament and song suggests that, in its emphasis and expressivity, music surpasses language and thus leaves behind every determination that might confine it within the realm of finitude. Music is the insistent infinitization of the experience of finitude. If this is so, however, then lament does not simply have a social dimension, as if it were embedded in a social network that can be managed and regulated, a network that regulates, a mere thread in a securing social nexus. If lament is an irreducible possibility—in the sense of an indissoluble structural trait—of every language, then even in the language of communication something that cannot be made common, something undialogical and without language, is at work that dissolves social connections, undoes their fabric, destroys their threads. Lament is isolated right into the tiny, disappearing point where it can no longer be counted as a lament and where it cannot be placed beside a second or third. It is infra-singular and super-general, incomprehensible as category, a language not of determination but of the absence of determination, goal, intention, and, *a limine*, also of voice. That it can be heard in conversations and also, again and again, in choral music might suggest that communities lament, first and foremost, their own disintegration and that they restore themselves in this lament. But it might also indicate that in their lamenting—as in Job’s dialogues and in tragic choruses—a language *before* every community, *before* every social or even political idiom, and *before* every conceptual generality is opened up and, as the opening of an *other* language, opposes every known language.

This also affects form. Pain cannot simply be given form, because every form can in turn elicit pain and be broken by it. What would form be if it could not be torn apart by pain? What would pain be if it did not distort every form? The movement of pain, which always demands forms and always destroys them again, undermines every form, rite, and pattern of relation that should avert pain and brings about their collapse. It is once again instructive to remind ourselves of Hegel in this context, since he claims that his philosophy is a philosophy of Christianity and, more precisely, of the truly Christian spirit of Christianity, which he thinks as a religion of pain and its *sublation*: of the pain of finitude, which, felt as such and articulated in the form befitting it, should also already be modified, relativized, and relieved. The Christian tradition that culminates in Hegel’s comments is a tradition of making social, of universalizing and spiritualizing, but also, therefore, of the denial

of pain. Understood as the *pain of the negative*, it is always also the *work of the negative*. As this work, it is productive. And as productive pain it is only that pain that does its destructive work as the work of transformation into always new figures of spirit, and, finally, into the one, utmost, figure of absolute spirit containing itself and thus into the form of all forms. This latter, the absolute idea, as pain *itself*, would at the same time have to be its relief; it would have to be pain as sublated, preserved, dissociated from and eased by itself. Yet the pain that has been sublated in this sense, pain understood and made spirit—Hegel is right—is no longer pain. It might have been relieved *as* pain, but there is unrelieved pain precisely in the fact that it does not do its work of destruction *as such* a pain, as the possible object of a concept, as a pain that is productive and that produces figures, but rather as that pain that works outside all concepts and therefore this side of all figuration and spiritualization. It is pain that is always incomprehensible, absolutely without spirit and sense, pain that cannot take form. But it is not only without *sense* and subject to no teleology; it is also that pain that attacks the *senses*, paralyzes them, and robs them of their ability to orient. Someone “out of their senses” is “overwhelmed” by pain or so “dazed” by it that the whole sphere of sensibility is concentrated on this pain, absorbed by and pulled together in it. Pain is sheer sensibility and therefore is also already no longer a sensibility that could be contained, that could be led to an intended purpose or form.

If there were a form “adequate” to pain, it could only be one that arises from pain itself. Pain would have to continue to be at work in it and to deform it through every instance that would differ from it. Even expressions of pathos, as these are categorized by rationalistic psychology and physiognomy, therefore do not exhibit forms so much as they do their distortion, ellipses, and hyperboles of form, deformations and the collapse of forming. Pain has no measure, no standard, and no limits—it has no dimension—that might allow it to be understood in an integral figure, to be “sublated” and made bearable by being neutralized. It is therefore more than doubtful whether paintings such as Grünewald’s *Crucifixion* or Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* can be considered Christian paintings in the sense of Hegel’s definition of Christianity. In these pictorial laments, the formless is drawn in from the extreme limits of formal conventions, breaks in form—the glaring disharmony of the incarnadine, the excess or withdrawal of compositional gestures, the dramatic rigidity even of what is unstable—break through the defense against pain, which could only be ensured through figuration, and make the image explosive, in one instance, and worn out, in the other. In the image’s disfigurations, the representation of decomposition, together with what is represented, deteriorates. Not-painting is painted, the speechless speaks. Hence the traumatic hyperrealism of these lamenting images. If there is nevertheless a “sublation”—a preservation and neutraliza-

tion—of pain, this is only in the lamentlessness with which they stand behind and beyond every determinate measure of lament. For if pain and complaint exceed all measure, then they also exceed “themselves,” and they do so in such a way that lamentlessness speaks in every lament, apathy in every pathos, the inability to bear pain in every pain. The medium of their communication is not a mediation; it is that which cannot be mediated, the measureless, which afflicts language and with it all measure.

### 3) COMPLAINT NOT A NEGATION

Every complaint can be understood as a request, or even a prayer, for help, at least for an answer. Yet the relation to help, like all of complaint’s relations, is paradoxical. In that it affects the whole sphere of what can be addressed, thought, and interpreted, complaint empties the world, creates a *tabula rasa* and can therefore never be done with whatever—like every *tabula*—belongs to the world and to all possible worlds. Because it could only be the object of a complaint, an answer to complaint cannot be expected from a future world. Thus, if complaint is the request for an answer, it is only one that rejects every answer, one that revokes itself. Complaint means the end-lessness of complaint; end-lessness means the dissolving of all the limits that might check complaint; and the ceaselessness of complaint means that in each of its movements it brings itself before nothingness. The gesture of complaint is therefore described inadequately if it is characterized as the rejection of everything that encounters it as object or counter-discourse, as answer or resistance. It also directs itself against itself and, as the complaint against complaining, is always also a resistance to itself and its rejection of itself and the world. It complains about the rejection that it itself engages in; it pushes forward with it and fortifies itself as resistance against it. In all of its modalities, it is an auto-apatropism.

Complaining is therefore characterized by a double gesture: it presents a “not” and rejects it. Complaint is the first linguistic form—the form of the detachment from every form—that allows what is called “not” and “nothing” to emerge. Before it there was none, and without it there would be none. Complaint over what is *not*, what is *not* adequate, *not* whole, and *not* real brings out this “not” and this “nothing” in the first place. It has—this is always its latest message—nothing good to relay, nothing new to report, nothing useful to say. It is the messenger of failure, the language of that which says nothing or not enough. It does not, thematizing theoretically, negate a state of affairs that is already there before it—a nothing is not “objectively” given, nor is it a state of affairs. It is what first gives rise to and makes manifest its nothingness by lamenting it. It, complaint, and not first of all the logical negation in which it is at once formalized and constrained, is

the movement—the movement of language but also emotion—that clears the path to nothingness. It is therefore one of the movements that opens the first of all philosophical problems, the problem of fundamental ontology as such. It lies not in *creatio ex nihilo* but in *creatio nihili*. It also remains a problem in complaint in the strict sense of the word, for complaint opens the nothingness of the world about which it speaks merely in speaking against it. Whoever complains shows a nothingness to the world or the nothingness of the world and at the same time rejects it with their complaint. This double gesture of showing and rejecting makes complaint an irresolvable complex-ion of *creatio* and *decreatio nihili*. Only with it is the ambiguous path opened to the creation of what is said “to be.”

Complaint does not destroy what is already there before it or what can be foreseen in its future. Rather, it *voids* in the sense that it first of all exposes something absent, missing, and lacking, and also in the sense that it rejects it as absence, and in the third sense that it preserves it in its rejection. In all three meanings, it is not a mere observation, and also not a negation, but rather the event of the disclosure of a lack or lapse, of a harm, or simply of something not there. *As* this disclosure, it is the affirmation—in fact the first affirmation—of what is not missing “in itself” but rather of what *it* is missing. Its not is the affirmation of a not. Only in this affirmation, no matter how concealed or mute it might remain, does it become a potential object of the intention to do away with this not, this refusal of a something, and to annihilate it. Showing it does not precede the rejection of the not, however, for it is only disclosed as rejected or to be rejected: disclosed in that it can be rejected. Given that complaint itself is therefore also disclosed as lacking, as soon as it announces its presence, however implicitly, it extends to its own occurrence, once again in the double turn of a not to its not. It is therefore the constant negating of a negating, its first affirmation along with the rejection of what is affirmed in it: a yes to a no that is disclosed in that yes as something to be said no to.

This makes clear, however, that complaint is more powerful than every nothingness it exposes, that it is the scope of nothingness and its rejection, and that it also remains this scope if it shows itself to be deficient and as such rejects itself. Therefore, complaint’s powerfulness does not consist in having the power to grasp the nothingness that it has uncovered and to delimit it conceptually or affectively. Rather, complaint is at the mercy of nothingness as that by which it itself is constituted. The complaint over the powerlessness of complaint belongs to the structure of complaint no less than it does to the series of causes of complaint. “Who, if I cried out, would hear me then”: this is how every complaint complains about its lack of scope, its lack of an addressee, the absence of an answer that corresponds to it, the absence of a language in which it could be expressed. More powerful than the nothingness it uncovers, complaint is not therefore capable of a power of its own but only

as showing its powerlessness. It is merely the power of *allowing* for powerlessness, of surrender to it, and of the opening for nothingness that it provides in itself. As destructive as complaints might be, they are first of all the awareness and the allowance for what is experienced as indestructible vacancy, as the absence of any possibility of taking effect, and the loss of ability altogether. In this sense, every complaint stands *before* nothingness and *outside* it from *within*. It is in itself the transcending into what is not and never was. And as this crossing over, it is the event of this very non-being and not-having-been, in-capacity and non-becoming.

If it must be said that complaint is the event of the nothing that it discovers, rejects, and preserves in its being rejected, then it must also be said that—as this event—it is a not-nothing. Complaint is thus not a not to nothing in the sense of the logical negation that negates a presupposed nothing and thus gets caught in self-contradiction. And it is not a not to nothing in the sense of a logical limitation that confines the presupposed nothing by denying it determinate predicates and judging it, for example, to be *unthinkable*, *unproductive*, or *incomplete*. This negation of a determinate predicate of nothingness always determines the logical subject in a single point—unthinkability, unproductivity, or incompleteness—but leaves it indeterminate in its relation to the infinity of other predicates. Although this limiting judgment depends upon its infinite continuation—and is therefore described as “infinite judgment”—there is no positive determination in the always unique point that it describes through its negation as a not-nothing, but rather the determination of *determinability*. This not-nothing has thus proven itself to be something that can be determined and therefore to be a being that through further—if infinitely many—determinations can in principle be taken to its logical determination.

Hermann Cohen, whom we have to thank for the rediscovery, following Kant and against Hegel, of infinite judgment, placed it—as “judgment of the origin”—at the beginning of his *Logic of Pure Knowledge* [*Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*] because it is the origin of the purely logical determinability of objects in general.<sup>5</sup> Gershom Scholem’s important treatise “On Lament and Lamentation” (“*Über Klage und Klagelied*”) is oriented toward this logic of the not-nothing;<sup>6</sup> the outline of Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption* (*Stern der Erlösung*)<sup>7</sup> follows it; and significant parts of Benjamin’s linguistico-philosophical and historico-philosophical conceptions, transformed from a logic into a history of the origin, developed from it. Without entering into it further here, one can say in particular that the logic of the origin as Cohen presents it and as Rosenzweig develops it further at the beginning of *Star* makes a presupposition of the nothing, positions this presupposition as negatable, and uses this negatable presupposition as a means for producing a not-nothing and thus a something. Not only is this nothing merely logical, but as logical presupposition for knowledge, it is in no way nothing but rather the instru-

ment for the production of something. Cohen therefore speaks explicitly of a “methodological” recourse (*Logic* 92ff.) to the *creatio ab nihilo*, Rosenzweig of an indispensable “presupposition” for the knowledge of divine infinite being, Benjamin, in his “Theological-Political Fragment,” of a “method . . . called nihilism.”<sup>8</sup> In his study, Scholem comes to the conclusion that lament is “the language of annihilation” and, at its utmost limit, causes the revelation of God (“Lament” 129). But where it is used as a means to construct or attain something, not only is nothingness not nothing, it is already the defense against it concealed in its opposite concept. Yet precisely this defense is no more thought in the logic of the origin specifically as defense than is the instrumentalization and methodologization, the disaffecting, of nothingness. Completely missed in this logical construction, however, is the nature of the opening and affirmation of nothingness as event. Moreover, since within logic nothingness can only assume an ambiguous status, insofar as, on the one hand, it is a nothing, and, on the other, it is named and therefore not-nothing, the discourse of infinite progress in determining this nothing also remains ambiguous and, furthermore, undermines unnoticed the thinking of the infinity of God and his revelation. This infinity too, instead of being the saturation of an emptiness, must be thought as traversed by precisely this emptiness. Thought from the leaky ground of the logical limitation of a logical nothing, Being can only be a posited, concrete, incomplete being progressing in differential degrees toward preestablished purposes. It can only indicate the “object” of complaint, not that complaint’s beginning and not its event.

No matter how linguistic it is, complaint is not “logical.” It does not speak in utterances, and it cannot be translated into “positive” or “negative,” “true” or “untrue,” accurate or inaccurate utterances without ceasing to be a complaint. It always hits its mark, for it only reveals what it laments and discloses the defects of its showing, as well as the defects of what it shows. It always hits its mark, because it always encounters a not and encounters it as insufficiently rejected by it and as always insufficiently shown by it. It is always at once “true” and “untrue,” because the only criterium for both is the lamentableness from which it cannot except itself. If it condemns, it does not condemn what is but rather that which in it is not: it does not condemn on the basis of something positive but with regard to what is lacking in every positive and its position.

Yet as unlimited as the field of complaint is, it remains restricted to what it can thematize—albeit inadequately—and does not include the event of its thematizing. Since no event can be made the object of a presentation without thereby ceasing to be an event, the course of every event must remain unrepresentable and irrefutable. To put this in logically formalizing terms, complaint is unable to negate the unnegatability of its negations. This side of all positing, complaint—as the disclosure of a nothingness of the world and of it-



self—is the affirmation of its own unnegatability and thus also of the unnegatability of its event. It is therefore above all the complaint that it is—indeed irrefutably—an event. Even if it rejects everything and itself, *that* it rejects it and takes place in this rejection remains irrefutable for it. But it also remains indemonstrable. Consequently, that which, in it, is the event of the disclosure of its—and every—nothing also remains indemonstrable for complaint. While complaint may also lament itself, in doing so it reveals and dismisses itself only as theme, while the event of lamenting, its presentation and rejection, must elude it. What escapes complaint structurally, its own event, however, the absolutely unlamentable.

To make the fundamental traits of the movement of complaint more precise: its transcending into what *is* not in the sense of a given object or content of representation cannot be an existing process, nor can it be totally itself and as such present to itself. Since it moves toward a not, its very course must be determined by this not; it must be in-determined in every sense. But what characterizes every movement is only made clear in the extreme movement of complaint, for every movement, insofar as it is movement, must move toward what it is not, must be the transition into its non-being and, as such a transition, cannot be absolutely present to itself. Precisely because complaint crosses over into that which is not, therefore, it must be the event of a non-event and must be the event of the non-presencing of this event. As transcending into nothingness, it can only be a transcending into non-transcending, it must be transcending without transcendence and, as the transition into what it is not, transcending without immanence. Linguistic movement, and *in extremis* the movement of complaint, understood precisely, is ad-transcending and atranscending. Only as the event that is not thematically present to itself is complaint finite. It can only be turned away from its finitude, its non-self-presence, its inaccessibility to itself, and its lack of self-foundation. In contrast, it can only be turned toward the in-finite repetition of its self-thematization, in which it never stops missing itself. The movement of complaint—the movement of the opening of what is in no way objective and present, the movement of the opening of language—this movement of complaint pushes up against an unsurpassable border within itself, where, unrepresentable and unnegatable, it slips away from itself as event.

#### 4) COMPLAINT AND ANSWER

The answer to complaint can only make clear what eludes complaint itself. It is not an answer as long as it presents itself as the object for further complaints. This implies that it is only an answer if it does not present an opinion, judgment, or explanation in which the motives for complaining, its consequences, or its implications are thematized, but rather only when this answer

itself has the character of an event. This event, if it is to be an answer, cannot have the character of an action that follows the intention of acting upon complaint consciously, in controlled fashion, and with definite goals—defense or mitigation—for every intention can be outdone, rejected, and lamented. Therefore, it is not the kind of answer that complaint demands. It can only be an answer if it hits the mark without judgment or intention and if it hits complaint where it cannot be expected, anticipated, and defended against. Since the horizon of complaint is always a world, and this world is defined by the presentations and refusals of a nothingness to what constitutes it, the answer must be not only an irrefutable event, it must be the event not only of another world but also of another *as* a world. It cannot, therefore, be the event of an overworld, hinterworld, or deeper—in whatever sense—world that has an answer to offer lament. Every innerworldly and every outer- or over-worldly other can only present himself as the theme of a complaint and must be rejected as incapable of answering. When Scholem writes in his treatise on lament, “There is no answer to lament; that is, there is only one: falling silent” (“Lament” 130), he at once captures and blurs the problem of the lack of an answer. For lament is always also a lament about the muteness it encounters, and thus muteness cannot be a response to it. But when Scholem continues, writing, “Only one being can answer lament: God himself” (“Lament” 130), he overlooks the fact that God can also be lamented and that this one being himself also laments and in his lament splits himself in two. No instance and no attitude, least of all that of a supreme power, can offer an answer that could not be shown to be insufficient and that could not be rejected as non-answer.

Lament can only encounter an irrefutable answer in an event that, as event of language and of the linguistic world of its emergence, would at the same time be the emergence of the not or not-yet of this world. The answer can only be a beginning or pre-beginning of the world; it must come from the place that lament leads back to since it shows the deficiencies of the world, its failures, and its non-being. But since lament eludes the fact that, as the opening of that nothingness, it itself is an event and thus a beginning and a pre-beginning, the only answer adequate to it would make clear that it is precisely that event which eludes itself and thus cannot be negated or lamented. Only that in the lament which denies the lament can be given access to it by the answer: that it is in every sense ahead of this answer and of itself.

For what is expressed above all in lament is the desire to return to before oneself. This becomes clear in the famous chorus from *Oedipus at Colonus* that says, “Not to be born surpasses thought and speech. / The second best is to have seen the light / and then to go back quickly whence we came.”<sup>9</sup> And it becomes clear in the first line in which Job delivers his laments. In those lines, he curses the day he was born and the night he was conceived: “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night which said, ‘There is a man-

child conceived.’ . . . Lo, let the night be solitary, let no joyful voice come therein” (Job 3:7). What Job demands here is that this demand itself be revoked. By wishing he didn’t exist he wishes he didn’t have this wish. He speaks against his own speech, he *contradicts* his speech, in that he laments and thus works toward the revocation of creation, works not toward another, happier creation, but toward none. The first and only desire driving his lament is the return to before creation, to something that would be different from an *other* world and different from a *world*. This wish of all wishes—to have no wishes—this nonsensical and yet undeniable wish that strives to refuse the wish and is therefore more powerful than any refusal, which is nothing but a wish and nothing but the event of wishing, since it turns back to even before its own manifest existence, this wish with no other goal than its own non-being and never-having-been does not merely propel lament; as the irreducible event of wishing, it is the event of lament itself. This one wish is thus the only one that cannot be the object of lament. While the wish to have a wish, which is no less aporetic than the wish not to have one, is only a wish for its own existence and enhancement, but with this existence and enhancement enters into the circle of an infinite lament, the wish not to be is in itself different from what it aims at: it is the yes to the nothing it opens onto and, as the event of this yes, is spared every complaint. Only as wish without world, however, is it open to an answer that makes clear that it is a wish, that as such, it is an event, and that as event, it is at the beginning of a world and even in advance of this beginning.

Creation is not an answer to lament; it gives the impetus for it. The one who laments was not there with his wish at the moment of creation. Job is made aware of this by Yahweh’s answer to his laments. This answer is not given in the form of a statement about a state of affairs; it is given as a question. It is one of the first in a long catalogue of questions and goes, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding” (Job 38:4). This not only suggests that Job does not “have understanding” and cannot answer Yahweh’s question, it also suggests that he had no place at the “foundation” of the earth and that before this “foundation” his laments were without foundation, as was his wish to return to before creation. What, moreover, can be said, or at least hinted at, however, is that with his creation Yahweh created a wish that exceeds every creation because it returns to before it. That Job’s wish not to be and not to wish is more powerful than God’s wish to found a world, that sheer wishing frees itself from its creatureliness and turns against all acts of foundation and all foundations toward un-founding—this allows it to become an event that is still this side of the world of well-founded and causal sequences of events and thus to become an event without foundation and without a God thought onto-theo-logically, a God who founds.

The question posed by Yahweh's answer does not merely suggest that Job has no grounds for complaint. It also indicates that his lament makes itself independent of Yahweh's act of foundation, that it turns to Yahweh *before* his creation, to a god even before he was one, therefore that it turns to no one and nothing and asks for an answer from nothing and no one. That he was not present at creation does not merely imply that he is a creature; it implies, moreover, that his wish not to be created spares him from creation and its disappointments and makes all help by way of an answer unnecessary. That is why Yahweh's answer is a question. And it is why it is unanswerable—for there is nowhere where Job would have dwelled before creation—and, as rhetorical question, dispenses with any answer. It concedes that Job, in his lamenting as in his wish never to have existed, is free of creation and its God, and so of everything that can be lamented. It concedes that that wish, as nonsensical and unfulfillable as it might be, while of course an event within and on the basis of creation, is at the same time an unfounded event that abandons the horizon of what has been created and needs no hold in it. An event without foundation, this wish is the event of nothing, and the life led by the wish is a life before its beginning, at the utmost border of time, of space, and of the language of a world. It is life free of itself. This implies that Job lives without foundation and thus without the compulsion to live. While he does not exist, he is—transitively—his nothingness. And it implies that since Job's laments and Job's wish are the laments and the wish of the world, with them this world also turns back to before its creation and is an irrefutable, unlamentable event free of the founding of the world and thus of itself. When Job has understood this implication of Yahweh's question and thus the movement of his own wish, he finds no more grounds for lament.

He has understood that Yahweh's answer tells him nothing that could belong to the order of knowledge or cognition. Job can only answer in turn, "Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3). Lament and answer refer to each other not as objects of knowledge but as the addressees of mutual renunciation. Yahweh absolves Job of responsibility for creation; Job, Yahweh of responsibility for his sorrows. They tell each other only that they are talking to each other and that this talking to each other is how they release each other from their connection.

Lament is the detachment of the event of the world from the world. The only compelling answer to it can only make clear *that* it is this and can only release it in that it too, this answer, detaches itself from all relations of foundation. It is the answer of a creator who thinks back to before his creation, and it pertains to a lament that does not follow the laws of this creation. Lament and the answer to it do not meet up in a common world but in the thought that there is no world. They speak to each other not by knowingly corresponding to each other but by *contradicting* their—and every—

language. If a conversation does more than maintain conventions, it is on the way back to before the beginning of language.

—Translated by Jan Plug

## NOTES

Throughout the chapter, “complaint” and “lament” translate the same German word, *Klage*, which in certain contexts can also mean “charge” or “indictment” and is closely related to *Anklage* (accusation) and *Klagelied* (lamentation). Forced to choose between the English terms, the translation tries to hew close to the texts and contexts under discussion, though it should be kept in mind that *Klage* invokes both, just as *complaint*, for example, means both an expression of grief or pain and a statement of dissatisfaction.

Published in German in *Lament in Jewish Thought*, ed. Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 89–110.

1. The Lamentations of Jeremiah, 3:8. *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Edition*, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

2. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke in drei Bände*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1966), 441.

3. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 159–60. All further references are to this edition and will be made parenthetically.

4. Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 72.

5. Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, in *Werke*, vol. 6, ed. Helmut Holzhey (Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms, 1977), 84–89. Further references will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically as *Logic*.

6. Gershom Scholem, “Über Klage und Klagelied,” in *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, ed. Karlfried Gründer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 128–33. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “Lament.”

7. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 25–36.

8. Walter Benjamin, “Theological-Political Fragment,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 306.

9. Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 202.