

**THEORIES OF KNOWLEDGE:
FATE AND FORGETTING
IN THE EARLY WORKS OF
WALTER BENJAMIN**

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Our knowledge of Walter Benjamin's writings tends today to divide into broadly theoretical constructions and intensely discrete, often microscopic examinations. This corresponds, no doubt, to two aspects of his work and career that were constants from beginning to end. Whether, in his earliest writings, he was attempting fundamental reflections on the theory of language at the same time that he was producing one of the first detailed interpretations of Hölderlin's poems, or in his last works, he was reflecting critically on our entire tradition's constructions of history as he was also pursuing highly specific studies of Baudelaire and nineteenth-century Paris, Benjamin seems always to have had it both ways. But Benjamin's "two-way street" becomes our divided highway when we seem unable to cross easily from a theory of literature or cultural signification to the minutiae of a reading of literature or images—and when his quick exchanges between theory and reading, become, under our interpretations, less well-marked cloverleaves than grid-locked textual passages.

Our divided views and attempted appropriations of Benjamin and his work may be construed according to another familiar pattern. Benjamin, it is said, started out as a philosopher and became a critic, a close reader of literature. And yet the later, literary-interpretive work continued to generate both fundamental epistemological critiques and universalizing theories of kinds of meaning and representation. The philosopher reads literature, and his readers must then read language and literature reverting, under his hands and eyes, toward philosophic

labor and statement. This difficult exchange is familiar to us in the recent and ongoing example of Paul de Man. De Man was also one of the very first in this country, in the sixties, to introduce Benjamin's work into our discussions of literature, and Benjamin remained one of de Man's last texts—indeed, for the text for his last lecture, on Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator." So our problem with Benjamin, the problem of our bifurcated knowledge of his intertwined productions, appears also as a larger present problem in literary studies: the question of a theory of language and literature and their reading that always departs from and returns to the specifics, the "minute particulars" of textual reading, while pulling the latter toward a more global understanding.

A version of Benjamin's itinerary that sketched an uneasy move from philosophy to literature would be overly hasty and probably unilluminating for those who are not already familiar with his early work, for his years of technical study and training in philosophy are themselves marked by several shifts in terminology and aim. These shifts can perhaps best be approached by noting his changing attitude toward what we may call "theory of knowledge." In the rather specific senses in which Benjamin uses the terms *Erkenntnistheorie* and *Erkenntniskritik*—closer to epistemology and epistemological critique than to our current and often loose uses of "theory," as in the phrases "doing theory" or "literary theory"—one may note the stretching and expanding of terms that comes to characterize much of his work: he uses the terms, and criticizes and extends them in his usage. Much could be learned from a sustained study of his early involvement with and gradual reworking of the problem of "theories of knowledge"; a few introductory and tentative remarks must suffice here.

In his philosophy dissertation on "The Concept of *Kunstkritik* in German Romanticism," Benjamin writes of a theory or concept (of *Kunst* or of *Kunstkritik*, in his example) being "founded upon epistemological assumptions" ("auf erkenntnistheoretischen Voraussetzungen fundiert").¹ At about the same time he could write to his friend Gerhard Scholem, in answer to the question of "how I can live with my particular attitude toward the Kantian system," that "I am constantly at work to make this life possible for myself through insight into epistemology."² In both remarks, one notes the foundational, grounding effort to establish the epistemological assumptions or conditions of possibility for a theory or a life directed toward theory. The

same passage from the dissertation continues to the effect that, in the case of Friedrich Schlegel, these assumptions are "most closely bound to extra-logical, aesthetic determinations" ("auf engste in den ausserlogischen, ästhetischen Bestimmungen gebunden"). At first glance, and in isolation, this remark would appear to be of a piece with what is called Benjamin's early Kantianism, an interest initiated by contact with the teaching of Heinrich Rickert and the writings of Hermann Cohen, and gradually, indeed haltingly, developed across some five or six years of actually reading Kant's texts (1912–18). But we know that very shortly before writing this, he was also writing the devastating critique of Kantian epistemology that was posthumously published as "The Program of the Coming Philosophy," in which Kant's concept of knowledge is variously criticized as having been based upon an inferior, atemporal, mechanistic, empirical or psychologistic concept of experience, and in which Benjamin calls for a concept of experience that would be metaphysical, transcendental and avowedly religious. When this brief programmatic text closes with an invocation of the problem that Kant is said to have allowed himself to forget—namely, "the fact that all philosophical knowledge has its sole expression in language"—and as it calls for "a concept of knowledge gained in reflection upon the linguistic essence of knowledge [which] will create a corresponding concept of experience,"³ Benjamin is indicating an itinerary along which certain models and assumptions for epistemology are already being forgotten, while problems of language and linguistic "experience" increasingly emerge and shape his work to come.

The years in question, and especially 1917 and 1918, document a turn in Benjamin's thoughts on a prospective dissertation topic from Kant and history to Jena romanticism and criticism,⁴ and so does the dissertation itself rapidly turn from such an initial remark suggesting some kind of aesthetic intuition as a ground or foundation for knowledge, to an exposition of the ways in which problems of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*), intuition (*Anschaung*), and intellectual intuition are embedded in the thinking of reflexivity in the early romantics. The dissertation's pages on reflexion and positing (*Setzung*) in Fichte, Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel yield summary statements on Schlegel such as these: "Reflexion is no intuiting [kein Anschauen], but rather an absolutely systematic thinking, a conceiving [ein Begreifen]. Nonetheless for Schlegel it is self-evident that the immediacy of knowledge must be saved; what was needed for this was a

break with the Kantian doctrine, according to which it is solely and uniquely intuitions that guarantee immediate knowledge [einzig und allein Anschauungen unmittelbare Erkenntnis gewähren]."⁵ Such a formulation preserves a demand for immediacy even as it would indicate reflexion's break with Kantian intuitionism. When a slightly later passage asserts that Schlegel seeks "a non-intuitive intuition of the system [eine unanschauliche Intuition des Systems], and he finds it in language. . . . Schlegel's thought is an *absolutely conceptual*, i.e. linguistic one [ein *absolut begriffliches*, d.h. sprachliches]" (*GS*, I, 1, 47), the linkage between a conceptual system, an immediacy of knowledge, and a break with intuitionism emerges as language. Without entering into the many difficulties of the entire dissertation, it can be seen that this paradoxical claim for a "non-intuitive intuition" found in language links up with Benjamin's contemporary claim, in the programmatic text on the "Coming Philosophy," for "the linguistic essence of knowledge."

A last provisional step may be taken in this selective outline of Benjamin's early philosophic writing. As is well known, the "Epistemo-critical Preface" to his book *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* rejects both "knowledge" (*Erkenntnis*) and the pairing of the term "concept" with that of "system," in favor of "representation" (*Darstellung*) and "idea." The rejection of "knowledge," as a merely acquisitive or possessive category, is anticipated in an earlier essay on language, a text to which I will turn briefly near the end of this paper; and the argument on behalf of "representation," and specifically the self-representation of truth in ideas, is a complex one that deserves its separate treatment.⁶ Here, a point to note is simply that what Benjamin considers the proper object of philosophy, namely, the representation of ideas, is said to appear for observation (*Betrachtung*), and specifically to appear as images (*Bilder*).⁷

Within Benjamin's early philosophic work, then, one may discern a move from knowledge via intuitions, to knowledge of knowledge's so-called linguistic essence (while still preserving a claim to immediacy), as well as a move from knowledge as acquisition or possession to the observation of self-representational imagery. Within his oeuvre, the move was said to be one from philosophy as the theory of knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*) to philosophic criticism as the close but still theoretical reading of literary language and images. For our purposes, these shifts in Benjamin's terms and aims may be reconstrued as a shift from knowing to reading, all the while along an

axis of immediate intuition turning into some other kind of insight or observation; in traditional terms, this shift encompasses the philosophic notions of *aisthēsis* as a primordial "seeing" or sense-perception, and *theōrein* as a privileged "sight" or siting and insight of knowledge. If Benjamin gives up intuition as a means of knowledge of language, and gives up any notion of a "conceptual system" as an adequate form for language, then what does he come to see in the reading of verbal or linguistically constructed images? I am going to argue that the entire move from a philosophic theory of knowledge to a critical reading of images is, for Benjamin as well as for us, a matter of seeing reading. That this occurs along a trajectory from thematic treatments of fate and of remembering and forgetting, to structural insights into the fate and forgetting of reading, it is the project of this paper to demonstrate. What began as epistemological assumptions (*Voraussetzungen*) or conditions of possibility for (any possible) theory (whatsoever), turns into the theoretical insight into what is set out in advance (*vorausgesetzt*) for knowledge: insight into its fate.

What a theory of knowledge sees when it sees its knowledge is its *Voraussetzung*: its assumption, and the assumption of its fate. How can Benjamin's theory of knowledge be said, in his early writings, to see its fate? The 1920–21 essay titled "Fate and Character" may be taken as exemplary. In this essay, he poses the term and theme of fate in its relation to possible kinds of knowledge. The essay actually begins with what Benjamin calls the common view that would link knowledge of character, together with knowledge of events of the external world ("das Weltgeschehen," later "die Aussenwelt"), to predictive knowledge of fate, character being "commonly viewed" as having a causal relation to fate.⁸ The essay quickly dismisses the causality, and its second paragraph similarly dismisses the ostensibly clean conceptual distinction between inner man and outer world; the remainder of the essay attempts a reconceptualization of fate and character within distinctly different spheres. Some aspects of its revisionary attempt shall be of interest later in this paper, but here the task is first to look closely at what the first paragraph actually says and shows about knowledge of fate.

As if in immediate conjunction with the opening thought of character causally determining fate and yielding knowledge of it, Benjamin writes that "an immediate intellectual access to the concept of fate" ("Einen unmittelbaren gedanklichen Zugang zum Schicksalsbegriff") is not possible within our current notions, so we

moderns must evidently accept instead the thought of access to character. What kind of access is this? It is a reading of traits (or features), specifically those of the body. Whatever that "immediate intellectual access" to knowledge of fate which is denied us might have been, this access to knowledge of character through reading is linked to the former denial (note that "daher moderne Menschen sich einlassen" ["therefore modern people accept"]), yet it scarcely seems any more nearly immediate: it too, after all, is a reading of surface, bodily features. And yet immediate knowledge of and access to character are then immediately asserted: the sentence continues, once again linking knowledge of character and knowledge of fate, "because [modern men] somehow find knowledge of character as such before them, in themselves [weil sie das Wissen um Charakter überhaupt irgendwie in sich vorfinden] while the notion of analogously reading the fate of a man out of the lines of his hand seems unacceptable to them [während die Vorstellung, analog etwa das Schicksal eines Menschen aus den Linien seiner Hand zu lesen, ihnen unannehmbar erscheint]." This concluding half of the sentence not only relinks the reading of character and the reading of fate by way of their contrast (the contrast of their acceptability), but also posits a twofold aspect to knowledge of character: it is a reading of signs ("aus den Zügen zu lesen"), and yet also knowledge of its object found, as it were, *before* the reading; and within themselves, not in external traits or features ("sie das Wissen um Charakter in sich vorfinden"). They, the modern men, already know character within themselves before they read it from without.

This assertion of mediated knowledge founded upon premediational or immediate knowledge is said only of knowledge of character; an analogous relation within knowledge of fate is said to be (or appear) unacceptable. Benjamin then heightens this unacceptability: "This appears as impossible as it appears impossible 'to predict the future' [Dies scheint so unmöglich wie es unmöglich scheint, 'die Zukunft vorauszusagen']." The sustained contrast between knowledge of character and knowledge of fate—the reading of the former, the unacceptability of an analogous reading of the latter—is now defined according to a second register: the claim for reading surface or bodily traits of character because knowledge of it is found before and within one appears to invoke a contemporaneous and spatial axis of inside and outside, whereas reading from similar features to knowledge of fate would move on a temporal axis from the present-at-hand

to the future. And yet what about the "vorfinden" of knowledge of character? Is this immediacy ("in sich") really so atemporal? Indeed, an implicit temporal dimension in the knowing and reading of character is immediately made explicit: the contrast between knowing character and knowing fate is said to be one between knowing from the past and present, and not knowing from the present to the future; the "telling-in-advance of fate" ("die Voraussage des Schicksals") is subsumed to predicting the future—the impossibility of which is suggested—allowing character to appear as "something lying before [us] in the present and past" ("etwas in Gegenwart und Vergangenheit Vorliegendes")—and as such, "therefore knowable" ("also erkennbar"). One can read between the present and present-at-hand and the past, but one cannot read from the present to the saying-in-advance of the future.

It is evident that, in looking at Benjamin's theories of knowledge here—be they of knowledge of character, or of fate—one is seeing a theory of reading. Another way of posing his question, then, is to ask what distinguishes the reading of character from that of fate, for both read signs. Yet the reading of character seems to find something else as well: not just the traits or features at hand, or on the body, but "knowledge of character" ("das Wissen um Charakter"), or even character itself as something lying before one. But as the repeated use of "seems" or "appears" ought to indicate—Benjamin casts these opening sentences under the ambivalent aegis of *scheinen* and *erscheinen*—he is about to revise this apparent contrast between the two kinds of reading. "But," his next sentence begins, "it is precisely the claim of those who profess to predict men's fate from whatever signs . . ."—and then what? What follows will be Benjamin's restatement of reading fate, in such a way that the apparent differences between it and the reading of character collapse, while the structure of either—or any—reading emerges more clearly.

One who professes to predict fate from signs is said to be one "who knows how to notice it (one who finds before him, in himself, an immediate knowledge of fate as such) [der darauf zu merken wisse (der ein unmittelbares Wissen um Schicksal überhaupt in sich vorfindet)]." The phrasing unmistakably reduplicates the language describing an immediate knowledge of character used several sentences earlier, and thus the difference between the two kinds of knowledge and reading appears collapsed. But this formulation adds a new element: "der darauf zu merken wisse." How does one understand, or

translate, *merken* here? Those who (claim to) know how to predict fate from signs know how to *read* them—this much has been said already—but what do they notice or note, mark or remark? They do not notice “fate in itself,” anymore than they could notice “character in itself”: a few lines later, it reads: “like character, fate, too, can be apprehended [surveyed] only in signs, not in itself [zwar kann ebenso wie der Charakter auch das Schicksal nur in Zeichen, nicht an sich überschaut werden].” “Knowing how to mark or notice it” means knowing to notice or remark upon the mark of a prediction: it is knowing how to read signs that “speak out in advance” (“vorhersagen”) of their temporal location. The *merken* is simply, as it were, the seeing of signs, but not so much their sheer perception or visual sighting, but their observation *as* signs: as notes or marks. Whatever “perception” there might be here is a seeing or sensing of signs as signifying (in this case, as signifying ahead of themselves). When the sentence then parenthetically adds that such a person “finds before him, in himself, an immediate knowledge of fate,” what he finds before him are signs that speak—or spoke—before their time. Noting signs, “reading” them *qua* signs and thus as significant, is “knowing” fate through signs. It is also knowing how to read.

The “immediate knowledge of fate as such” comes second, not only in the syntax of the sentence structure but also in its logical sequence. What is seen are signs, signs that speak out ahead of themselves, which means that they must be noted and read. But if the signs’ speaking in advance is the very constitution of the mode of existence of fate in the present, then to have “immediate knowledge of fate as such” is to know that one has noted signs *qua* signs—to have “read,” in some sense, that they are readable. The object of knowledge here is not “fate,” but fate in and as signs; as the object of the notation or *merken*, they are “already found” or “found before” one: *vorfinden*. The difficulty with what this sentence asserts is in the use of “immediacy.” The signs were there in advance, marked in or on the body—they had only to be noted as readable—but the “immediacy” of knowledge of fate is then retrospectively posited as already there, as the immediate or prior and founding object of knowledge. The difficult but real distinction is not between an unmediated seeing-but-not-yet-reading and then a knowledge of how to read, but rather between reading and then, *nachträglich*, knowing how to read.⁹ The knowledge that comes with reading signs of fate calls its own production an immediacy: it posits a moment or things before this knowledge. But

what is "found before" it, are the signs it already knew how to note or to mark, because they were read.

Thus, when the sentence concludes that for those who know how to predict fate, for those who know how to mark or note it, fate is "in some manner present or—more cautiously said—in place," what was formerly a proleptic condition—the future to be predicted—is now collapsed into a present condition of signs at hand or in place, and a retrospective knowledge of their so-called immediacy. The structure of saying-forward or -in-advance ("vorauszusagen")—predicting the future—and then seeing, as if "back," to what is at hand, already inscribed, is a structure of reading signs that speak forward *and* convert, or are read back, retrospectively, as providing the knowledge of how to read what was at hand yet in advance of this very knowledge. The knowledge so constituted is not the object of some immediate intuition (*Anschaung*), but of an *überschauen*, an apprehension or surveying of signs. Even the sign or trait "lying immediately before one's eyes" ("unmittelbar vor Augen liegen") means nothing, Benjamin says, but the interconnection of sign and knowledge that is in place only in signs, "laid upon the immediately visible" ("über dem unmittelbar Sichtbaren gelegen"). The immediacy of knowledge is not seen or seeable—in place—except as it is sighted/sited beneath or behind the signs that produce or yield the knowledge.

There are no causal connections here—Benjamin says this much—nor any apparently causal sequence of present or anterior immediacy and then a subsequent or posterior unfolding of a reading or interpretation. Fate is read, noted as significant signs, and this *is* knowledge of fate as at hand, present, or in place. It is fate that we learn to read, by which is meant both understandings of this proposition. It is the concept of fate—foretelling something in advance—that we come to read and know when we learn to read. And it is *our* fate that, upon noting signs, we are—as if fated—to learn to read.

This is a difficult point in Benjamin's thought, and the exegetical remarks thus far have perhaps served to occlude as much as they have sought to explicate. A turn to another early text may clarify what the stakes are for Benjamin and for his readers. In a passage from *Einbahnstrasse* titled "Madame Ariane zweiter Hof links," written within a few years of the "Fate and Character" essay, Benjamin tries to distinguish kinds of treatment of signs and thereby to reintroduce a distinction between fate and character that his opening paragraph of the essay had, as a structure of reading, appeared to collapse. To ask

of the future—as the reader of fate might before its signs—is, unknowingly, at the cost of a more precise, more inner knowledge of what is coming (*GS*, II.1 [vol. 10], 141–42). The passage privileges a vitalist, energetic vocabulary unlike that of the paragraph previously examined, as it contrasts (“nichts sieht weniger . . . ähnlich . . . als”) being present at the revelation of one’s fate with the quick grasp that *poses* (“stellt”) the future. The future is grasped in a quick present moment and yields, as its “extract,” “presence of mind” (“Geistesgegenwart”). And this grasping of a future in and into a present moment or even a second that achieves or fulfills something (“genau zu merken, was in der Sekunde sich vollzieht”) is favorably contrasted to merely knowing a distant future (“Fernstes vorherzuwissen”). In terms of the temporal structure of the “Fate and Character” paragraph, this initial contrast would appear to bring the future “zur Stelle” or “in place” in a present, but also separate off and denigrate mere “advance knowledge” of a future still separate or distant in time. Both involve the encounter with signs—“Vorzeichen, Ahnungen, Signale”—as did both fate and character, and in both cases these signs are in the body (again as with fate and character), but here the activities are given opposed and irreconcilable names: “deuten . . . oder . . . nutzen, das ist die Frage. Beides aber ist unvereinbar.” “Interpretation” gets a bum rap here, “use” a glamorized one.

What emerges rapidly is that this separation of future and present is the temporal construal of what, epistemologically, is the condition of mediation of knowledge by way of signs: a “word or image” that signifies in advance (“prophecy or warning”) is a *mediating* element (“ein Mittelbares”), but before the knowledge of that future becomes such a present sign, it has lost its significance or signifying power—namely, a power of greater intimacy or immediacy of knowledge (“die Kraft, mit der sie uns in Zentrum trifft und zwingt, kaum wissen wir es . . .”). Bringing the future into the present has to happen so quickly, in a split second, or it happens not at all; should it establish mediating signs, it loses both significance of the future and a signifying impact upon the present. The temporal relations of either present signs to future significance, or of present interpretation to any possible linkage between present and future, are at stake here. Signs, once in place, seem to yield a paradoxical *entziffern*: they decipher themselves, but the same exteriorizing prefix *ent-* suggests that they thereby lose or alienate their very significance in this signification.

Reading, it is clear, is also at risk: to read such signs means to read them too late. One kind of collapsing of future into present, in a second of immediacy, has been foregone, and another mediation of them is too retrospective, too late; it is as if both the present and its signifying relation to a future are already past. The point to retain here is that all of this laziness and cowardice and tardiness and the like is on the part of signs—their interpretation, their mediation, their self-deciphering, their reading. What signs do is call attention to themselves *qua* signs, but this process of signification produces the evacuation or loss of their significance; their mediating status between the future to be known and the present of that signification dissolves both the coming of that future (it is as if past) and their present significance. Signs provoke, call forth interpretation and reading, but their mediation and this understanding signify insignificance and misunderstanding—missed understanding.

The retrospective understanding of the knowledge of fate and character that was established in the essay of that name is what is at issue here: “language which you only now [too late] understand [dessen Sprache du erst jetzt verstehst].” The explicit textualization of that essay, with signs before one to be read, is reposed here, but in a negative light. If life is a book with a text—signs—there is a second text or script that glosses the first and emerges only retrospectively, in remembering, as the signs missed and the missed reading. This second script—signs of their non-signification—is “invisible” (“unsichtbar”) until the time of its significance has passed, and “prophetic” (“als Prophetie”) only in retrospect, not toward a still-future future. This is bad fate (and also what Benjamin will come to criticize as a certain kind of historical reading and thinking).

These signs seem never visible or “in place,” except as remembered as once having been invisible, or returned, too late, to place (“zurückstellen”). What is thereby missed, Benjamin writes, is the chance to measure and conquer “the fates” (“Den Geschicken”). The collapsed instant of bringing—or not bringing—signs of the future into the grasp of a present is the moment of deciding fate: reading it “in advance,” or only retrospectively; or rather *not* reading it, but knowing and using it, or *only* reading it. The messianic impulse to convert both the future that is coming and this present instant into a *Nu* of “fulfilled now” (“erfülltes Jetzt”) would be an immediacy of time, and an immediacy of knowledge: “Geistesgegenwart.” The naked body, like the body on which the signs of fate and character were

inscribed, becomes the image of this immediacy; and this image is tellingly located as if before time or history, in "Urzeiten." With this instrument, one might once, like Scipio, have diverted "signs" and "images" of a coming fate ("Schreckenszeichen, Unglücksbild hat werden wollen") by converting them in and into "true practice": the body's immediate, instantaneous grasp of itself.

Doing something or not doing it and, only too late, reading; immediacy or mediation; signs grasped or signs interpreted; a future determined by a now or a future passing through a mediating but ineffectual present and presence of signs: these are the polarities that organize this textual passage. It will be clear that *forgetting* also plays a role here, even if not a verbally explicit one. The "remembering" ("Erinnerung") that, like ultraviolet light, retrospectively exposes signs that gloss a book or text of life is predicated upon a forgetting, a forgetting to see something invisible, or to grasp something immediate and immediately. But the remembering is too late; to remember is already to have forgotten, and then one might as well forget it—forget remembering, that is. Remembering and forgetting reexpose or re-present a present that was coming and is no longer: they expose, develop, and represent a temporality that "true practice" would grasp, pose, and undo.

Forgetting as well as remembering stand on one side of the same set of polarities, of which a present and presence of immediate knowledge constitute the other side. This juxtaposition brings us to the closing image of the passage. Time, presented here as each and every dawning day, lies before us "like a clean shirt," an "incomparably fine, incomparably tightly woven textile [tissue] of pure prophecy [dies unvergleichlich feine, unvergleichlich dichte Gewebe reinlicher Weissagung]." The "happiness" of this present (day), which is also that of the immediately coming future—and is furthermore opposed to the "Unglück" mentioned just above—depends on whether we *know*, have knowledge, to grasp the shirt immediately upon awakening into time; or conversely, whether we forget.

The curious twist to this textual conclusion is that putting on the shirt would be like exposing our naked body to fate. Putting on the shirt strangely forgets that the body is no longer naked, or it remembers what it *is* no longer. To put it another way, *not* to put on the shirt, to remain naked, would be to fail to grasp the tightly woven text of prophetic signs which, however, once put on, both covers the body's signs and is laid over them, as if a retrospective, but tardy gloss.

Benjamin seems to have forgotten whether he wants to start the day—to start time—naked or clothed, whether he wants to know the signs of time in his hand's grasp or his "center" or his "organism," or to wear them on his sleeve in a finely woven text.

But where can one remember Benjamin first posing this image or textual of textured phrophecy, and indeed, within an opposition of *Glück* and *Unglück*, happiness and misfortune? It is toward the end of the essay "Fate and Character," after he has attempted, despite his initial paragraph, to separate off fate from character, the former into a sphere of guilt, misfortune, and the demonic world of law (here one sees the valorization implied in the "Madame Ariane" passage), the latter into a sphere of innocence, happiness, and a world of nature. "Happiness," he writes, "is . . . what releases man out of the enchainment of the fates and out of the net of his own [fate] [aus der Verkettung der Schicksale und aus dem Netz des eignen]" (GS, II.1, 174). It is out of this classical image of fabricated fate—chain and net—that character then attempts to emerge, albeit with difficulty, for the image does not dissolve instantaneously. "The concept of character," Benjamin writes, "will have to rid itself of those traits that constitute its erroneous connection to the concept of fate. This connection is established through the notion of a net that can be tightened by knowledge at its will into the firmest weave [eines durch Erkenntnis beliebig, bis zum festesten Gewebe, zu verdichtenden Netzes]." "Alongside the broad underlying traits," he continues, "the trained glance of the connoisseur of men is supposed to perceive finer and closer connecting traits, until what was apparently a net is tightened into a cloth [bis das scheinbare Netz zu einem Tuch gedichtet sei]." From chain to net to cloth, Benjamin is weaving an image of a shirt. But this is what character is supposed to get out of: "In the threads of this weave [In den Fäden dieses Gewebes] a weak understanding finally believes it possesses the moral essence of the character concerned, and has distinguished his good and bad characteristics" (GS, II.1, 176–77). But it is not so easy to disentangle some character from this tightening web. Even at the end of the essay, when character is asserted to be "unfolded . . . sunnily in the brilliance of its single trait" ("entfaltet sich . . . sonnenhaft im Glanz seines einzigen Zuges"), and to be "the beacon in whose beams the freedom of [his] acts becomes visible," Benjamin's text recalls the woven textile scarcely put off: "The character trait is therefore not the knot in the net" (GS, II.1, 178). If character emerges from the weave of fate into the naked light of

its own free visibility, why then does the happy man, a few years later, get up to be redressed in the tightly woven textile of the shirt? What has Benjamin forgotten, or remembered?

What Benjamin appears to have forgotten is that the concept of "character" is a theory of knowledge accessible or "in place" in a network of relations between signs and their reading: this may be called a text in the particular instance, textuality in the general; and this is all in the first paragraph of the "Fate and Character" essay from which Benjamin then diverts or turns away. A countervailing turn of forgetting and remembering was seen in the "Madame Ariane" passage, from grasping the naked, bodily sign away from or in advance of a fateful and belated reading, to grasping a finely, tightly woven textile and using it to cover such would-be immediacy. This whole tissue of fate and character, remembering and forgetting, happiness and misfortune, and images of signs and textures recalls Benjamin's essay "On the Image of Proust," on which Carol Jacobs has written finely and densely.¹⁰ The essay begins by invoking a physiognomics, or sign-reading, of both character and fate: "Proust's image is the highest physiognomic expression that the ceaselessly growing discrepancy between poetry and life was able to attain."¹¹ When the next paragraph seeks to describe Proust's work not as of a life as it really was ("wie es gewesen ist," with a dig at Ranke's historicism), but as of a life as it was remembered ("erinnert"), Benjamin immediately remembers that he is forgetting something; or two things, for he immediately adds weaving and forgetting: "For here, for the remembering author, the main thing is not at all what he lived, but rather the weaving of his remembering, the Penelope-work of memory. Or ought one not rather to speak of a Penelope-work of forgetting?" Having remembered forgetting, he elaborates and embroiders the image of weaving: "is not this work of spontaneous memory, in which remembering is the weft and forgetting the warp, much more a counterpart [ein Gegenstück] to the work of Penelope than its identical image [sein Ebenbild]?" One needs the warp, first attached to the loom, before one can have the weft interwoven by the shuttle, and the analogy suggests that we have forgetting before remembering: we customarily remember only because we have first forgotten.

So here, Benjamin's image has remembering weaving upon forgetting. And yet the image then suddenly swerves, to yield remembering not *weaving*, but *unweaving* or *unravelling* the textile-

work of forgetting, wherein forgetting becomes, as it were, the shuttle as well as the loom: "For here the day unravels what the night worked. Each morning, awakened, we hold in our hands, for the most part weakly and loosely, only a few fringes of the tapestry of lived existence such as forgetting has woven it in ourselves [wie Vergessen ihn in uns gewoben hat]." This appears to be a far way from Benjamin's courageous man's grasping of his finely, tightly woven shirt upon awakening. Benjamin here pushes the unravelling a step further: "Each day, with purposeful activity and, even more, with purposive remembering, unravels the web, the ornaments of forgetting [das Geflecht, die Ornamente des Vergessens]."

Rather than grasping a textile in advance of a fateful forgetting and the subsequently belated remembering, the day begins with its unravelling-work of remembering, the unravelling of the work of forgetting. A text is a weave, Benjamin reminds his reader, and he claims there is none "more tight" ("kaum einer mehr und dichter") than Proust's. And perhaps, Benjamin suggests, this is because Proust couldn't stop writing: the galleys' margins get filled with more text, like a textile wherein even the borders are enwoven. But now—Benjamin's text continues—this weaving on is not, as above, the work of forgetting, but of remembering: "[it is] remembering that here issues the strict weaving regulations [die Erinnerung, die hier die strenge Webevorschrift gibt]" (GS, II.1, 312). Benjamin can't seem to remember whether he has Proust's text (through) remembering or forgetting. Or as Carol Jacobs puts it, Benjamin has an interweaving of the two (p. 92).

Why remembering at all? Benjamin seems to have asked this when he appeared to have had forgetting be both loom and shuttle. Proust desires happiness, *Glück*, Benjamin suggests. But not by emerging out of a net of fateful interconnections that tighten into a fabric, nor by grasping such a fine, tightly woven piece of textile upon awakening at daybreak. Rather, this *recherche* is for what Benjamin calls "the eternal restoration of the original, first happiness . . . which for Proust turns existence into a preserve of memory" (GS, II.1, 313). But this turning-into or transformation (*verwandeln*) is no more a one-way street of remembering than was the initial imagery of weaving by remembering *and* forgetting. What Benjamin calls the "bridge" or "gate" to Proust's dream (GS, II.1, 313) turns out to be Proust's notion of "similarities," and not just anyone's: "The similarity of one thing with another, with which we calculate, and which occupies us

when awake, only skirts the deeper dream-world in which whatever happens, never emerges identically, but only similarly—untransparently similar to itself [was vorgeht, nie identisch, sondern ähnlich: sich selber undurchschaubar ähnlich, auftaucht].”¹²

Benjamin’s claim for Proust’s pursuit of happiness has led him, and his reader, to this crux of non-self-identical self-similarity, along a path on which both perhaps always already were. That is, the attempt to correlate Benjamin’s disjunctive or disharmonious imagery of fate and character, reading and seeing or grasping, remembering and forgetting, may have been predicated upon the assumption that any one of these was self-identical, so that two or more might then be similar. But what emerges from the last sentence about Proust is that any one image may be not only non-self-identical, but of an untransparent, impenetrable similarity to or within itself, such that an immediate perception or surface-bodily access or grasp to its signs would always miss its grasp and displace, misplace, or forget. Benjamin gives one more elaboration to this thought, the well-known image of the stocking, and it is said to be not a “true practice” of a firm, courageous grasp, but the “truth-sign,” the “Wahrzeichen” of a labile, childish turning-inside-and-out. The rolled-up stocking is both outside and inside, container and contained, “pocket” and “present” within: sign and knowledge. When a “grasp” then appears (“mit einem Griff”) to turn this two-in-one structure into a third thing (“dies beides . . . in etwas Drittes zu verwandeln”), into the stocking, this is not then the self-identical “real” stocking, but a likeness (specifically, an analogy) for Proust’s image, which, Benjamin continues, is structured like the child’s stocking in that a containing-but-unreal “dummy-ego” (“die Attrappe, das Ich”) contains a “real life” of memories and forgetting and yet is neither one nor the other, but is always emptied so that *the image* can be brought about and in.

The relation of the child’s stocking to Proust’s image, or of Proust’s image to the introduction of the more general “image” that appears at the bottom of the paragraph, is neither identity, nor even twofold similarity. Each relation has the threefold structure of sign (token, likeness), meaning, and the “untransparent” similarity between the two—an untransparency or visibility which this paper began by addressing as reading, and now turns into imagery. Just as an outside surface seems to assure a full interior in the child’s stocking or in Proust’s representation of character and remembering, and yet gets turned into a third thing—stocking or image—so did the surface-level,

visible noting or marking of signs seem to promise a full, immediate knowledge of character, only to turn into a third thing: the reading of fate, "seeing" the fate of reading, namely, that we are fated to read, not see. So, too, one sees here neither surface nor depth, neither mere sign nor profound meaning, neither immediacy nor interpretive mediation, but "a third": the untransparent relation of both in an image of reading.

It may appear that, with these remarks, one is far from the problem of forgetting and remembering. The closing image of the image seems to present a recirculating relation between three images of it: the image as a sign (say, the sign of fate or character, or the rhetorical vehicle for a tenor in the paragraph on Proust); the image as meaning (say, the knowledge of fate or character in relation to their signs); and the relation between the two which is the reading of images, and thus may be called the imagery of reading. But to the extent that this is on Proust, remembering is not far behind, and Benjamin is not far behind Proust. This paragraph is closely echoed in a passage near the beginning of Benjamin's autobiographical *Berliner Chronik*. Benjamin is writing of Proust's own role as a model or influence in Benjamin's "chronicle" or, as he puts it here, "these memories of my earliest city life":

The renunciation of any playing-around with related possibilities will scarcely find a more binding embodiment than that of the translation [of Proust] that I was able to produce. Related possibilities—do they really exist? They would certainly not tolerate any playing-around. What Proust began so playfully became a breathtakingly serious business. Whoever has once begun to open the fan of memory always finds new wings, new segments; no image satisfies him, for he has known [erkannt] that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the real thing [das Eigentliche] reside; that image. . . .¹¹

The "related possibilities" which this passage invokes may allude to what Benjamin called Proust's "non-identical similarities." But the transposition (or *Übersetzung*) from Proust's image as a stocking to Benjamin's as a fan is no fooling around. To have said, as Benjamin's discussion of Proust did, that his imagery and all the relations among images occur within the transformation ("verwandeln") of existence into "a preserve of memory" is, in Benjamin's terms, to say that

the relations among images are the unfolding of the image as the structure and action of remembering: there, the stocking; here, the fan. The verbal images of "transforming," "emptying out," or "unfolding" "bring in" ("einbringen") one thing: the image in the discussion of Proust, *knowing* ("erkennen") the imagery of the fan of memory in this passage from *Berliner Chronik*. In terms of the explication at the beginning of this paper, the image of (a theory of) knowledge in the unfolding of a temporality from noting a sign of the future to, retrospectively, seeing the knowledge as an anterior one, is neither just a claim for immediacy, nor just the display of this first claim under or through the texture of a structure of reading, but also "a third thing" ("jenes Drittes"): the image of unfolding significant imagery, for what is known is that no image satisfies, as each is in the folds of an unfolding.

The unfolding of the image does not end—it does not come full-circle to a refolding or reinteriorizing, an ultimate *Erinnerung*—and if this is memory in Benjamin on Proust, its imagery occurs against a horizon of forgetting in Benjamin on language. What is meant by this assertion is that, for all the hopeful imagery of an *unfolding* of languages toward what he calls "pure language" in several early essays on language, this sense of a last fullness of the folds is situated against a backdrop of real, human forgetting. The early essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," for example, has as its famous "last word" that "All higher language is the translation of lower ones, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds [entfaltet], which is the unity of this movement of language"; and this conclusion has as its counterpart the methodological avowal, somewhat apologetically put forth, that in his statements in this essay, "language is presupposed [vorausgesetzt] as an ultimate reality, inexplicable and mystical, observable only in its unfolding or unfoldedness [Entfaltung]." ¹⁴ But as the tension of this translation might suggest—is *Entfaltung* here the dynamic of unfolding or the achieved condition of unfoldedness?—or as the semantic tension between "inexplicable" and "unfolded" also indicates, this effort toward an image of fully revealed language is always situated within and against the condition of human language—in the critique delivered in the essay in question, a fallen, inadequately knowing form of language. In Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," an early claim closely echoes the closing statement of the essay "On Language . . .": "In [translations] the life of the original attains its ever-renewed, latest and most comprehensive unfolding

[Entfaltung]" (GS, IV.1, 11). But toward the end of this same text, this image of ongoing unfolding has a less bountiful counterpart. Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles are said to be the image of translation for all others: "they relate to even the most perfect translations of texts as [does] the prototype to the model [als das Urbild zum Vorbild]." And this is, Benjamin continues, as "meaning [Sinn] falls from abyss to abyss until it threatens to lose itself in the bottomless depths of language."¹⁵ Whether in the rather benign view of unfolding or in the rather less benign view of falling, whether in the explicitly theological thematic of a God's-eye view or in the more human perspective of inexplicability and loss of meaning, this recurrent imagery of language's unfolding *qua* translation is vouchsafed not by a goal (*Ziel*) of verbal re-membling (anymore than in the statement about Proust's unfolding of memory), but by the end (*Ende*) of human remembering in a necessarily ongoing forgetting. The relation of remembering and forgetting in Benjamin is less one of extremes—even of dialectizable extremes—than of a sort of inverse proportionality, wherein both human remembering and human forgetting occur coordinated on the near side of an absolute non-forgetting, which latter, however, can never be known, spoken or written.¹⁶ The process of remembering—remembering an "original," "pure language," say, or an "original" text through its translations—entails increasing forgetting of all actual, material languages and meanings, and only what Benjamin calls "an unforgettable" ("ein Unvergessliches")—what is never forgotten, and therefore never available to rememberings—allows for what he knows as our languages of forgetting. "Certain relational concepts," he wrote in "The Task of the Translator," "retain their good, yes, perhaps their best meaning if they are not straightaway exclusively referred to man. Thus an unforgettable life or instant could be spoken of, even if all men had forgotten them" (GS, IV.1, 10).

The unforgettable in Benjamin knows no remembering. This is not to say that it might not *be* remembered, or held in memory—this is always his messianic gesture—simply that it would not be *known*. The "near-sided" (*diesseitige*) temporal structure of verbal remembering and forgetting is, of course, chastised by Benjamin as an inauthentic one ("uneigentlich zeitlich"). As he puts it in the "Fate and Character" essay, "The complete elucidation of these matters depends on fixing the particular kind of time in fate. . . . This time can at every moment be made simultaneous with another (not present). It

is a non-autonomous time, which is parasitically directed toward the time of a higher, less natural life. It has no present . . ." (GS, II.1, 176).

Benjamin's "authenticity," if one dare risk this term, is to refuse to refuse insight into this inauthenticity; but, to paraphrase Paul de Man, to spot and site inauthenticity is not the same as to know authentically.¹⁷ The relation of times without any present, which is what Benjamin's reading and theory of fate expose, is what this paper has posed as a fate of learning to read. The fate of learning to read is that everything becomes read, even that which has not (yet) any present. As Benjamin quoted at least twice from Hofmannsthal (once in the piece "On the Mimetic Faculty" ["Über das mimetische Vermögen"] and again in a draft to the theses "On the Concept of History" ["Über den Begriff der Geschichte"]), "Read what was never written [Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen]."¹⁸ This is not reading presence or immediacy of knowledge, still less reading the Messiah, but reading the absence of reading. *This* vanishing-point, the forgetting of reading and of being read, is of course readable throughout secondary literature on Benjamin, and even in some of Benjamin's own work, as he pushes the apocalyptic-allegorical limit of his imagery. But in the strictest instance, and the most difficult to read in its effacement of reading, the injunction is to read Benjamin's image of his character in the sketch "Der destruktive Charakter." He writes that the "destructive character is a signal" (GS, IV.1 [vol. 10], 397), hence a sign to be read. Its meaning, he continues, is that "the destructive character erases even the traces of destruction [verwischt sogar die Spuren der Zerstörung]" (GS, IV.1, 397). How does one read from the sign to the meaning of the sign as its own erasure? This would yield "character"—the title word of the piece, after all—as if an immediacy of knowledge in noting the absence of reading (for the sign "means" that it is erased). But it also yields the trace—the non-present, now you see it, now you don't instant—of an erasure even in the erasure of all traces. This is the "untransparent" or the non-invisible, still-readable relation, the "undurchschaubar" similarity between noting images of knowing and remembering character and immediacy, and reading the image of forgetting fate and its reading.

NOTES

1. *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Werkausgabe, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhauser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980), I.1 (Werkausgabe Vol. 1), 15. Henceforth cited as *GS* with volume and page numbers.
2. Letter to Gerhard Scholem, 7 December 1917, in Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966), Vol. I, p. 158.
3. "Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie," *GS*, II.1 (vol. 4), 168.
4. For the documentation, see the letters of June 1917, 22 October 1917, 7 December 1917, 23 December 1917, 1 February 1918, 30 March 1918, and May 1918 (all to Gerhard Scholem except the last, to Ernst Schoen), in *Briefe*, I: pp. 137, 138, 151, 152, 159, 161, 176, 179, 180, 188.
5. *GS*, I.1, 32; see also 21 and 29.
6. *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *GS*, I.1 (vol. 1), 207–14. For a more extended discussion of representation in the "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede," see my "Death and Authority, End and Origin: Benjamin's 'Storyteller' Essay and *Trauerspiel* Book," the last chapter of my *Allegories of History: Literary Historiography after Hegel* (forthcoming).
7. *GS*, I.1: 210, 214, 215. That these images (*Bilder*) might not be mistaken for copies (*Abbilder*) of an existing reality, see also Benjamin's "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," *GS*, IV.1 (vol. 10), 12, where critical epistemology (*Erkenntniskritik*) is invoked to assert the proof of the impossibility of a theory of copies (*Abbilder*).
8. "Schicksal und Charakter," *GS*, II.1 (vol. 4), 171. Subsequent quotations from this essay in the next six paragraphs are from pp. 171 and 172.
9. In his dissertation (*GS* I.1: 32, 33, n. 48), Benjamin makes a similar argument regarding the relation between *Anschauung* and *Reflexion* in Fichte: "weil das absolute Ich seiner unmittelbar sich bewusst ist, nennt Fichte den Modus, in dem es sich erscheint, *Anschauung*, und weil es sich seiner in der Reflexion bewusst ist, wird diese *Anschauung* intellektuell genannt. Das bewegende Motiv dieses Gedankenganges liegt in der Reflexion; sie ist der wahre Grund der Unmittelbarkeit der Erkenntnis und erst *nachtraglich* wird . . . diese als *Anschauung* bezeichnet" (emphasis added).
10. Carol Jacobs, *The Dissimulating Harmony: The Image of Interpretation in Nietzsche, Rilke, Artaud and Benjamin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 87–110.
11. "Zum Bilde Prousts," *GS*, II.1 (vol. 4), 311. Subsequent quotations from this essay, unless noted in the text, are from this same page.

12. GS, II.1, 314. Subsequent quotations from this essay in the next paragraph are from this same page.

13. *Berliner Chronik*, ed. Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), p. 14.

14. "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen," GS, II.1 (vol. 4), 157 and 147. For uses of the term and image of *Entfaltung*, in which philosophy and religion are coordinated, see "Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie," GS, II.1, 163 and 170: "Die Philosophie beruht darauf dass in der Struktur der Erkenntnis die der Erfahrung liegt und aus ihr zu entfalten ist. Diese Erfahrung umfasst denn auch die Religion, nämlich als die wahre, wobei weder Gott noch Mensch Objekt oder Subjekt der Erfahrung ist, wohl aber diese Erfahrung auf der reinen Erkenntnis beruht als deren Inbegriff allein die Philosophie Gott denken kann und muss"; and "Es gibt aber eine Einheit der Erfahrung . . . auf die sich der Erkenntnisbegriff als Lehre in seiner kontinuierlichen Entfaltung *unmittelbar* bezieht. Der Gegenstand und Inhalt dieser Lehre, diese konkrete Totalität der Erfahrung ist die Religion, die aber der Philosophie zunächst nur als Lehre gegeben ist."

15. GS, IV.1, 25. Cf. Paul de Man, "'Conclusions' on Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" *Yale French Studies*, No. 69 (1985), pp. 38–39: "where it is said that Hölderlin tumbles in the abyss of language, you should understand the word 'abyss' in the non-pathetic, technical sense in which we speak of a *mise en abyme* structure, the kind of structure by means of which it is clear that the text itself becomes an example of what it exemplifies."

16. Cf. de Man, "Conclusions," p. 44: "any work is totally fragmented in relation to this *reine Sprache*, with which it has nothing in common, and every translation is totally fragmented in relation to the original. The translation is the fragment of a fragment, is breaking the fragment—so the vessel keeps breaking, constantly—and never reconstitutes it; there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge of this vessel, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes there has never been one." Benjamin's clearest statement on the inverse proportionality which obtains between human and divine perspectives is his "Theologisch-politisches Fragment," GS, II.1 (vol. 4), 203–04.

17. "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed., rev. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 214: "to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic."

18. GS, II.1 (vol. 4), 213; and I.3 (vol. 3), 1238.