Trace and source in Walter Benjamin’s thought

About a polarity

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To renew the past

Walter Benjamin held that “to write history means giving dates their physiognomy.” Berlin Childhood around 1900 offers an archive of such portraits of time. Written in the first half of the 1930s and published posthumously in its entirety, it collects texts that present in the most complete and harmonious way Benjamin’s philosophy of history, his heuristics, and his disinclination to theoretical systematization. In “News of a Death” we read:

I may have been five years old at the time. One evening, when I was already in bed, my father appeared. He had come to say goodnight to me. It was perhaps half against his will that he gave me the news of a cousin’s death. This cousin had been an older man who did not mean a great deal to me. My father filled out the account with details. [At my request, he described what a heart attack was. He was long-winded.] I did not take in everything he said. But I did take special note, that evening, of my room, of my bed, how we remember with heightened precision a place to which we sense that one day we will return to retrieve something we have forgotten. I was already well into adulthood when I learned that the cause of the cousin’s death had been typhus.

The punctum of this childhood experience and the keystone of the story that conveys it is not the lie but the friction between the facts and our comprehension of them. Therefore, in a passage entirely devoid of psychological or sentimental indulgence, the author does not linger on the literal content of his father’s discourse, as though it could be canvassed or corrected retrospectively. Its meaning is embodied rather in its style and in the moment, in the place, in the objects that participated in the evening encounter. When Benjamin comes to realize just how much had been omitted, instead of recriminating and rectifying the information like a resentful notary proud of having “discovered” how things truly were, he relives the dialogue, not in the form of a recollection, but rather assuming it as a specific past he lived that now belongs to the truth—the actual truth—regarding the death of his cousin. He does not recover the past; he removes it.

One could object that Benjamin offers us a charming little personal anecdote to which it would be wrong to attribute a significance of any general, let alone theoretical, relevance; we could, in fact, be inclined to believe that the biographical foundation of Benjamin’s work is the result of economic restrictions, his failure in academia, or the censorship that the Germany and Europe of the 1930s forced him to undergo. Berlin Childhood instead shows that he considers the documentary material with which his life had provided him to be not idiosyncratic, but prototypical. Such a foundation is thus biographical, and not autobiographical. If, in fact, Benjamin’s theoretical investigation is inseparable from the nexus of life, experience and intellectual activity, it is because he subscribes to this alliance a decisive role as much for the production as for the emergence of knowledge. One could also add that it is not appropriate to equate family chronicle and historical fact—that the poised security that enveloped the childhood of a German Jew as well as the inability of his parents to see the immediate future, the approaching catastrophe, should not be confused with the reasons behind the conflagration of Europe. Effectively active in this objection is a precious principle of precaution for avoiding “the sight in which all cows are black” and the moralism that accompanies it; Benjamin’s interest is not, however, that of homologating private and public, or better, microcosm and macrocosm, but rather to uncover their expressive tie. In fact, he applies an analogous approach to the link between economy and culture:

Marx lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture. For us, what matters is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture. At issue, in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic
process as perceptible Uphehomonemon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life in the arcades (and, accordingly, in the nineteenth century).\textsuperscript{3}

Benjamin refuses to abandon the facts to their supposed self-evidence and subsequently furnish extrinsic explanations that are foreign to them. Left on their own they remain mute and redundant, precisely like the deceitful prophesy of his father. The glorification of facts is always accompanied by verbal hypertrophy. The stance he takes instead critiques and creates sense; what interests him of his own minute familiar truth is that it evinces unforeseen and unmeasurable mutual recognition between historical moments. The past and the present conform to each other without any theology being at work; the past offers a range of possibilities to the present, which finds its own physiognomy by discriminating among them. It is a matter of the telescoping of the past through the present":\textsuperscript{4} collision and encounter, clash and interpretation. There is also, however, a telescoping of the present through the past.\textsuperscript{5}

The opening of sense, then, finds itself in a crisis. In fact, it is the present that polarizes the event into fore- and after-history.\textsuperscript{6} This produces an epistemological risk for those who find themselves embarked on a quest for knowledge, from which Benjamin never shies away.

In Berlin Childhood he puts into practice the two goals that would drive him for thirteen years, from 1927 to his death, in the collection of preparatory material for The Arcade Project: "To break with vulgar historical naturalism" and "to grasp the construction of history as such.\textsuperscript{7} These objectives require a historical investigation that is able to make explicit the Weltanschauung underlying it. When this is not performed, not only do the conclusions that follow come across as ideological, but the very method by which they were achieved does so as well. I understand ideology as Ideenkleid: the set of prejudices and notions that have produced a certain paradigm of thought and that have formed their own origin. Having become ideological, any given theoretical premise casts off its epistemological structure and assumes the guise of a paradoxically preventive and self-established justification. Criticizing such backwards conformism, Benjamin critiques the theory of history of the sort that emerges, for example, in the following passage by Franz Grillparzer: "To read into the future is difficult, but to see purely into the past is more difficult still. I say purely, that is, without involving in this retrospective glance anything that has taken place in the meantime.\textsuperscript{8} Benjamin comments: The 'purity of the gaze' is the greatest way to attain.\textsuperscript{9} It would be necessary, in fact, to postulate an originating moment, a big bang of human knowledge about humankind, an absolute self-reflection. Benjamin dedicates his entire body of work to the deconstruction of such a masquerade and, completely coherently, he adopts an intellectual hygiene that advances this goal even in its own existential procedures, as proven by the style of his letters, particularly in passages that address his condition as a migrant.\textsuperscript{10}

If Benjamin distrusts that which qualifies itself as "known" and that which aspires to a statute of objectivity instrumental to discourses through which peoples represent themselves, it is neither because his project is merely destruent nor because he is reacting simplistically to a conservative paradigm of thought. He is an invitation to make up one's mind between the representation of knowledge, that is, its construction ex post facto, and its presentation, along with the presentation of the processes that construct it, thereby shedding light on how man is made by history. The first considers data as traces and proposes explanatory causes, the second treats them as sources and proposes descriptive reconstruction through which it preserves its own records, the second scours them. Are these antithetical positions? I think not. The thesis that I would like to propose is, in fact, that traces are born, sources become. Between the two is a polarity. Trace corresponds to a preliminary position of domination over reality, source to a position of interrogation and metamorphosis. It would be superficial to recall that a perspective that focuses on the source does not at all wink at a form of epistemological relativism available to just any form of instrumental revisionism, and that it furthermore helps to avoid truism. In fact, a trace cannot be discussed as a source at any given moment and in any given way but, precisely to the contrary, in singular circumstances.

Moreover, the idea of a stable trace harkens back to the essentially paradoxical idea of a present that is as stable as the past is considered to be, and from which the past can be investigated—such a poorly conceived thought recurs frequently. For instance, we might recall how ecological thinking so often solicits an affected melancholy regarding nature as a "patrimony" to preserve. Or the contrary, Benjamin maintained that the thought has to start from scratch every time it finds an object of investigation, without relying on interpretive systems already at its disposal.

The origin and the source

The distinction between trace and source corresponds to a different way of implying the notion of origin in the humanities and social sciences. The trace is a clue that allows scholars to move backwards toward the initial moment of a genetic process of whatever sort; the source is a body—natural or artificial, but it can also be a concept—chosen from among the many available objects of study, in which the researcher recognizes an idea as stemming from it. The notion of "origin" is thus more plurivocal than any other. On the one hand, it is synonymous with beginning, primum, antecedent, original, model, and cause, and it produces such complementary concepts as succession, consequence, copy, result, and effect: a constellation of terms that pertains to the continuous thought and to the causal scheme underlying it. On the other hand, it indicates the origin, a notion not equipped with complementary concepts at all since it implies at the same time both the form and the content of the knowledge in question: the theory and the object itself. Jacques Derrida recalls in Quai Quelle that the notion of "origin as result" is privileged by Hegel in the Science of Logic, because "it reassembles the essence of speculative dialectics whose property it is.\textsuperscript{11}

From a methodological perspective on the opposite side of the spectrum, Goethe writes in Faust "Im Anfange war die Tat" that is, "In the beginning was the deed,"\textsuperscript{12} thus translating and modifying the incipit of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word." In the first case, origin is understood as a logical point of departure also serving as a point of return within the discourse on truth. In the second, it is an expression of a process of knowledge—one that is also historical, economic, and psychological—that renews itself in its becoming; this is precisely what Benjamin had in mind when he said he wanted "to grasp the construction of history as such. In this case we are dealing with preparing a portal to the objects under investigation, which avoids the contradiction inherent in the type of thought that assumes there is a novum in the material and intellectual history of humankind. Something like the novum, in fact, is always a posthumous recognition. Goethe poignantly notes the counterpoint of such an idea, stating: "We are original just because we know nothing."\textsuperscript{13}

In the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" of The Origin of German Tragic Drama, Benjamin offers an unequivocal stance in favor of this second articulation of the notion of origin:

Origin [Ursprung], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.\textsuperscript{14}

The origin emerges in the relationship, in the comparison between facts and the history that assembles them, to which we find ourselves lending our attention with the dawn of each now way. The origin is never ancient; it is always actual. Therefore precisely in the paradigm of a study dedicated to the Transgressions of several minor German authors from the seventeenth century, Benjamin hints that he does not appreciate in the least those archaisms that are nothing more than the instrument through which someone attempts to capture the essence of a word by projecting a primitive, and thus "true" appearance onto it, as though it strips time of its authenticity, and as though there were ever a time preserved from history. On the one hand, this fundamentally nostalgic belief proposes an equation between history and memory; on the other, it predisposes us to the melancholy regarding the future that today spans the Western world. Benjamin, by contrast, acted precisely in the opposite way. Although already engulled by the catastrophe, in 1936 he managed to publish in

\textsuperscript{3} Benjamin (see note 1), N. 1, 6.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., N. 7a, 3.
\textsuperscript{5} Just as [Siegfried] Giedion teaches us to read off the basic features of today's architecture in the buildings erected around 1850, we, in turn, would recognize today's life, today's forms, in the life and in the apparently secondary, lost forms of that epoch" (ibid., N. 1, 11).
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., N. 7a, 3.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., N. 7a, 6.
\textsuperscript{8} Cited in ibid., N. 7, 5.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} Among the many passages that could be cited, see his letter to Fritz Lahn, San Remo, July 9, 1917, in The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940, eds. G. Scholm and T. W. Adorno, trans. M. R. Jacobson and E. M. Jacobson, letter no. 288, p. 542.
\textsuperscript{12} J. W. Goethe, Faust, trans. C. Brooke (Boston, 1844), part I, scene III, v. 1237.
Scholars willing to cross the bridge, in short, tend too often to treat their own points of reference—conceptual, historical, living—as traces, at most against the background of a history of ideas. In this way, they combine their reciprocal competences, but do not delineate an actual object. Protected by disciplinary specialization, it is not then paradoxical if we are called upon to cohabit with thoughts that are incompatible with each other, like, for example, those that refer to art. Martin Heidegger holds that art "is the setting into work of truth," Robert Solso that "art is, after all, physical material that affects a physical eye and conscious brain," Steffen Pinker that it is a "pleasure technology" that, like cheesecake and pornography, "packs a sensual wallop unlike anything in the natural world because it is a brew of megadoses of agreeable stimuli which we concocted for the express purpose of pressing our pleasure buttons." Such a forced cohabitation produces nothing more than a conceptual hybrid. The neuroscientists of the visual arts, for their part, usually confuse the work of art with the lines and colors which are perceived, and take as a given a definition of art as "aesthetic fact" that in reality they do not have at their disposal, ending up with a circular discourse. They additionally accuse the humanists of culturalism, receiving in return—in 2 game of partisanship—the charge of reductionism. The problem posed by specialization and reduction does not, however, consist of defining in a restricted way one's field of research, nor of experimentally directing the conditions of the investigation; rather it consists of extrapolating and isolating the object of investigation by inserting it into a series of ascertained facts that is progressive from one's own point of view.

For a natural history of humanity

Extrapolating the object of investigation brings us to the theme of the quote, which was so important for Benjamin, who aspired to write a book consisting entirely of quotations and for whom such an extrapolation was actually the "opposite of isolation. For him, in fact, it is not a question of seeking that which would be singularly objective—an obvious paradox, but of recognizing in every phenomenon, in every word, its incoercible uniqueness, which becomes expressive of the epoch from which it originates precisely inasmuch as we recognize it as exemplary today. Such a connection can at first glance suggest a tautology by means of which expression and exemplarity are on equal standing. This would effectively be the case if we were to think that the past in its entirety was always and essentially not only knowable but also accessible in any given moment through those objects that it has bequeathed to us and that have remained faithful to it. Yet Benjamin does not have any intention of collapsing the past into the present. His notion of "expression" becomes perspicuous only if we consider it alongside the intellectual resistance to "empathy" towards our historic-cultural inheritance. Understanding a historical period through a type of its artifacts, much like understanding a system of knowledge through a few of its concepts, means avoiding a belief, on the one hand, in an absolute correspondence between the array of artifacts and concepts at our disposal and the epoch from which they derive, and, on the other, in a direct link between us and them. Benjamin called this critical attitude "to brush history against the grain." Of course, this does not equip us to obtain results with any grade of certainty, and the embarrassment that we experience from such a sense of impotence reveals how we are victims of the misunderstanding that knowledge ought to produce culture. On the contrary, research triggers a special capacity that Paul Valéry calls impéx: "The empléxis is [ ... ] our capacity for feeling, reacting, doing, and understanding ... individual, inconstant, more or less known to us ... but always imperfectly and indirectly (like the sense of in xeness)—and very often misconstrued. To all that we must add our capacity for resistance. [...]." 25 Note that impéx is a term that literary criticism has used to designate the recognition and the perpetua in a work, especially a theatrical one, in genealogy it designates the difference between the real and the theoretical number of an individual's ancestors. It indicates, then, a relationship of proximity that needs to be enacted in order to be fruitful. That is to say, it does not designate a position, but a relationship that remains virtual until the researcher sees us in action. Benjamin thus contrasts the notion of a series to that of an "irreducible multiplicity" 26 that finds its synthesis in the idea itself. With its use of "idea" he does not mean to allude in any way to idealism nor does he intend to enter into a polemic with conceptual thinking. Theodor Adorno has with good reason proposed to substitute this term—which is Latin in origin and without an equivalent in German—with Denkbild, or "thought-image," a Dutchism coined by Stefan George in The Seventh Ring. 27 Denkbild indicates both the form and the content of thought, both the theory and the datum, mediating between the cognitive processes of the subject and the material resistance of the object of knowledge. In the case of baroque drama we are dealing with the idea of the Trauer, which is immanent in the phenomenon in which it expresses itself through the formal development of a specific object—the theatrical text—in its various exemplars. The origin is, therefore, not a quaq but a relation of immanence—not a simple inheritance, but an essential and sensible correspondence. To capture it means to "blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled: in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history." 28 Origin is not then the result of a selection of contents from a certain number of cases taken from reality; it is not an incorporeal, abstract, atemporal attribute that survives material contingencies. On the contrary, origin only comes about in the body of history—in this regard it is antisemantic to the notion of the classical understood as a conservativest.
technological and industrial medium—the photographic camera—intervenes on our sensory experience of the world, transferring the reproduction of works of art from the hand to the eye, its lens creating images previously unthinkable since they exceed the limits of "natural" vision. He thus goes deeper into the nexus of aesthetics, esthetics, art history, and culture—in an authentically interdisciplinary way ante litteram—since "just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized—"the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history." Perception is historic and history is sensible. This research perspective, the idea of art as an emblematic example of origin, of the thought-image that we capture through the fictional artworks that variously and diversely inflect the historical-aesthetic nature of humankind. This is how the paradigms of partial and partial character of the most divergent definitions of art mentioned earlier depends on the act of hypostatizing the idea of art rather than understanding it as an Lr.

Trace and source

The dynamic relationship between trace and source polarizes the historical-natural legacy that accumulates with the passage of time. If an artifact—that is, the material concretization of a thought, behavior, or attitude (as, for example, the aforementioned impression in the shell)—is valued as a finding, it will be taken as a trace and sanctified the distance that separates the here and now from the then and there, the point of observation from the targeted object. This distance will in a second moment be suspended by the fictional historical present that frames the results of research in the humanities and the social sciences. If, instead, the artifact is considered the primus inter pares in a world of objects that are all potentially equally at arm’s reach and attract our attention by highlighting specific schemes of thought or behavioral patterns, it will be treated as a source. The polarity of trace and source on the epistemological level corresponds to the relationship between sight and touch as senses that provide specific portals to experience. The trace corresponds to sight, the sense of distance, of objective and universal knowledge in the first perspective to touch, the sense of proximity and of the reciprocal constitution of man and world—the sense that, as Herder has shown, allows different epochs to come into contact through works of art. Proximity does not mean physical closeness: That which is proximate maintains itself rather at a distance, for it preserves, if only tangentially, the impetus that brought it to touch. The imago, the investigator, whereas what precedes or follows in time and space can become extraneous to me. All of Benjamin’s philosophy of history is traversed by the theme of the proximity of the researcher to his object of study or interest—the way a book collector recognizes the time of his beloved objects the moment he takes them in his hand, and so on. In this Benjamin is animated by a desire antithetical to the desire motivating the masses—being born at the time—to “get closer to things.” For these reasons, the source possesses the character that Benjamin calls aural: “The trace is appearance of a newness, however far removed the thing that left behind it may be. The trace is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us.” The influence that it exercises over us does not, though hypnotic seduction, dissolve the critical distance the researcher is expected to maintain, but allows him, on the contrary, to bring to light a previously unforeseen object—an object that had left its mark though it had not yet been recognized, and was thus either destined to oblivion or to infinitely repeat identically to itself, which is the same fate. We are not then dealing with the contrast between a “cold” trace and a “warm” source. Rather, the trace is exemplified by the form of the beak of a bird beginning to originate knowledge and experience once it is seen as resembling that of a pair of pliers (fig. 1).

41. W. Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting," in Illuminations (see note 16), p. 61. George Steiner’s insight is noted in Benjamin as an "unextendable sense of the mystery of saying" (G. Steiner, "Inevitation," in Benjamin [see note 14], p. 14).
42. Benjamin’s relationship to his library is emblematic of the performative relationship with the past through the medium of objects we are discussing: "Unpacking My Library," pp. 59-67.
we have here is a series of variations that allows for the survival of the work in a new configuration. In and of itself, the head appears as a simple figurative fact in the different works of each artist, thus recurring in a succession of images much like a step in a series of footprints left by a walker. It is a trace. It acquires the heuristic power of the source whenever it is situated in a constellation of elements that we similar to each other. Yet, while Warburg aims to formulate a science of typical forms by developing an "historical psychology of human expression"—treating Darwin's lessons in The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals—Benjamin would not subscribe to the concept of a memorial deposit of humanity latently manifest in its products, just waiting to be discovered; his specificity, in fact, stands out precisely against the ahistorical approach that thinkers who work in the same Goethean and morphological perspective share with him. If, then, the chain of similarities that Warburg proposed, Memesynque planes is potentially infinite, Benjamin rather reckons that the recognition of similarities is instantaneous and unrepeatable. Similarity is a relation that one grasps in a "flash." "It is past."

Nonnonsense similarities

Such fleetingness applies both to the perception of phenomena and the fact that they let themselves be grasped. Scholom recalls that in 1918 Benjamin already "occupied himself with ideas about perception as a reading in the configurations of the surface, which is the way prehistoric man perceived the world around him, particularly the sky. This was the genesis of the reflections he made many years later in his notes Lehrs von Ahlachtsch on the Doctrine of Similar Things. Jean-Lehrs von Ahlachtsch is a version of On the Mimetic Faculty. Both texts carry out the phylo- and ontogenetic analysis of man's mimetic faculty and the transformation of his mimetic behavior, which reaches its greatest height in language, understood as the archive and canon of "nonsense similarities." In language, words, meanings, and signs set themselves apart. In the fragments collected in Zur Sprachphilosophie und Erkenntnistheorie, Benjamin carries out a logical and historical investigation distinguishing between the name through which the essence of the thing named coincides with its linguistic essence, as it was in the Adamic language; the word, which is the signifier, that "means" the thing while remaining extraneous to it and perfects to the realm of language as it is; and the sign that denotes the word. The sphere of the name is, however, lost forever. Our task, as the people of history, is to translate—not to institute but rather to present the relationship of similarities languages bear to each other. Such a relationship comes about between words and the meanings they share, not from the words taken on their own, much the way (in a truly interdisciplinary discourse) individual disciplines might resemble each other with respect to their object of study but not with respect to each other directly: "Words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that thing as their centre, [...]. they all—while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another—are similar to what they signify as their center." Goethe wrote:

"Translators are like busy match-makers: they sing the praises of some half-dead beauty, and extol her charms, and arouse an irresistible longing for the original." Translation is, in fact, a mimicry of the function of a man who has the capacity for producing and seeing similarities, for "his gift [...] is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else." Benjamin actualizes this compulsion in the first person, as he expresses his hope that amidst his writing and its significance might thrive an expressive inheritance, a free affinity: "I'd like to write something that comes from things the way wine comes from grapes." Such a compulsion acts on him precisely through words. Not those that made me similar to well-behaved children, but those that made me similar to dwelling places, furniture, clothes—namely, the themes he discusses in The Arcades Project. The idea that words can make someone similar to objects would be fantastical if we were to understand such a process as a metaphorical. Imitation does not, however, have anything to do with equivalence. The two are rather opposites. While imitation leads to "acting as though," metaphorizing the appearance of reality in the attempt to capture its essence, equivalence entails assuming the appearance of reality exactly as it presents itself. Equivalence is adhesive, whereas Benjamin holds, after Nietzsche, that "appearances are against the historian," because the kinship between things and concepts is voided in moments of transition between the epochs to which they belong, at the moment of reawakening (as he writes on multiple occasions)—that is, when they are estranged from the justification that the context as such always offers them, and the investigator can recognize their original sense not only independently but at times against the causal reconstruction of their genesis. In this way, he works on the threshold between epistemology and the production of knowledge. In fact, such estrangement is in turn the expression of our interest, our grave, our need to understand that produces an image not as a picture but as a freeze frame: "Insight is dialectics at a standstill." It is not put to use, nor does it have a spectator; such an image—to which the definition that Benjamin proposed for the aura is well

48. The nonsense similarity of Benjamin can be read in light of the "hyper-semblance" of which Rancière writes: "Hyper-semblance is the original semblance, the semblance that does not provide the replica of a reality but attests directly to the esothereme whence it derives. This hyper-semblance is the alterity of our contemporaries detached from images or whose disappearance, together with the image, they deplore. To tell the truth, it never disappears." I. Rancière, R友情, the Future of the Image, trans. G. Eliot (New York, 2007), pp. 8-9.


51. See W. Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in Illuminations (see note 16), pp. 69-82.


54. Benjamin (see note 45), p. 333.
sueted: "A strange tissue of space and time," is the emergence of a historical configuration that does not transcend the facts but rather makes them perspicuous in a renewed Gestaltung. It freezes the "reddy in the stream of becoming." It freezes the origin.

Nonsensuous similarity, therefore, provides Benjamin with a transcendental and historical criterion for understanding lived experience that overcomes the anthesis of subject and object.65 This permits a reading of facts and concepts not as results of actions and thoughts, but as their expressions, which activate the knowledge we have of them and if and when we recognize their ability to perform reality. In "concept" the capacity to conceive, to take or receive fecundation, in Begriff the capacity to begin, to grasp intellectually, and so on. Yet, to assert the general weakening of man's mimetic faculty through history as Benjamin does, does not produce in and of itself an understanding of this entelechy, nor of what we have become today. Rather, we have to detect the ways and media through which the reality generated by this depletion expresses itself. An example from our own time: Vitali Quadremari de Quincy could write with ease at the beginning of the nineteenth century that it is the back of our body that makes the backrest of the chair;66 the ergonomic deficit of most designer furniture indicates that abstract aestheticization is at work, which is symptomatic of the actual relationship of corporeal experience, on the one hand, and the representation of the body, on the other. Nonsensuous similarity does not, in short, constrain a group of elements into some sort of hierarchy. Once their genealogy has been recognized, it affords the actualization of the original idea that the elements express, where to actualize does not mean to certify. This misunderstanding could lead once again to a search for the common denominator of a series, the "same" syndrome, numerous examples of which Benjamin critically identifies in the twentieth century: the individual who disappears amidst the masses and the various articulations of "I" that are mutually equal, along with the repeated and repeatable gestures produced by mechanical labor.67 different objects with different use-values that become identical to one another thanks to monetization;68 fashion that also permutes similar repetitions of the identical.69 This would mean a major piece in the mainstream that produces them and the discourse surrounding them. It is therefore, as stated earlier, the evidence itself that works against the truth historian. Works, artifacts, and concepts resemble each other not because similarity is a characteristic at their disposal, but because it is a dynamic relationship that is captured at the very instant at which each element shows that it is ideally similar to any other, though remaining empirically distinct. This element maintains a proximity to its own center, which is its origin, which in turn transforms itself into the bodies through which it is expressed.

Benjamin, read in a non-messianic light, thus shows that man pertains to the natural world thanks to his faculty of transforming it along a chain of variations that enact the origin. For it is, above all, precisely nature that creates similarities, as demonstrated by mimery. When, however, he recalls that in games of make-believe children will pretend to be not only a doctor (a human being) but also a train (a thing), he shows that such a congenital predilection to metamorphosis provides the basis for the artifactual character of history. Thus, if man makes history inasmuch as he is a sensible body capable of assigning form to nature—that is, to himself—it follows that "neither mimetic powers nor mimetic objects remain the same in the course of thousands of years. Rather [...]. the gift of producing similarities [...]. and therefore also the gift of recognizing them, have changed with historical development."67 "Acting as though," then, does not serve to approach the origin directly but rather to try to glimpse it obliquely. For, as Benjamin writes in his Theses, "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize 'it' as it really was. [...] it means to retain hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."68 This danger is always that of forgetfulness and, today, that of the experience of the sublime in all its varieties, the result of which is too often a refusal to take the floor in favor of an unattainable presumption, when the origin is instead incommensurable.

History and the past

In Images in Spirit of All, Georges Didi-Huberman recognized the power that objects have to resist, in the aforementioned words of Proclus, "un passé enfanti et grossissant au fur et à mesure que le temps avance." He analyzes a particular typology: four photographs taken in August 1944 by members of a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz, where reality was shaped by two impossibilities, namely, "the imminent obliteration of the witness, the certain unrepresentability of the testimony."69 It was a matter of fact that these people would not survive. Their gesture of snapping these photos, and therein putting their lives in danger, is not merely a way of opposing the events as they occurred or of preparing documents for posterity. It means subverting the sense of reality with the sense of possibility. It means making the present possible for those who will come and will be able to take on the past if they know how to institute a relation of virtual contemporaneity with it, "for the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time: it says, above all, that they attest to legitimacy only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding to 'legitimacy' constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synonymous with it; each now is the now of a particular recognizability."70 For Benjamin there is, in fact, a radical difference between what is historical and what is past. The two are conceptually independent. The past becomes historical when it approaches our present, when it is made akin to it. It is not a matter of prefiguring the immediate future nor of staging a retrospection: "It's not that what is past came its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past, rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation."71 These four images, depicting nude female figures amidst the trees, are out of focus and their framing is not orthogonal with respect to the ground. Once discovered, they were "retouched": orthogonalized, blown up, the contrast increased, the faces defined, and the breasts filled in.72 The photographs were thus manipulated to resemble the appearance of reality; in this way, the editors prioritized their own optical perception over the existential and material conditions in which the photographs were taken. The source in which the faculty of testimony unique to human artifacts expresses itself has thus been restored in good order to its condition of trace, of document. Yet, to give a testimony does not mean to confirm but, on the contrary, to bring to the fore, to induce the figure to emerge from the ground. Thus, it was necessary to strip them again, as Didi-Huberman did, in order to emancipate them from the bonds of realism—symptomatic of a certain conception of history—and to shed light on what had been shown by the out-of-focus, the black, and the anti-figurative, in order to reveal the time and the place in which those people produced those images. The testimony is, in fact, an active process enacted by the gaze of the witness: it is said that the dialectical method consists in doing justice each time to the concrete historical situation of its object. But that is not enough. For it is just as much a matter of doing justice to the concrete historical situation of the interest taken in the object. And this situation is always so constituted that the interest itself is preferring in that object and, above all, feels this object concretized in itself and upraised from its former being into the higher conception of now-being [Jetztigkeit] (being-waiting).73

If artifacts are treated as source, one must accept that their knowledge is characterized by the instability of sensible and intellectual activity; otherwise one will favor the conservative nature of the trace. Benjamin's philosophy of history therefore defends the idea that man really is an act of the knowledge that sets in motion processes that present themselves as alternatives to those of the gnoseological subject as defined by modern philosophy. Benjamin—who declared as non-actual the hegemony that sensory and intellectual vision has exercised in the Western economy of knowledge, precisely when it had reached its apparent apex with photography and cinema—detected the source of knowledge no more in the consciousness of the subject, but in the prototypical experiences that rain underrun in the historic-sensory world. Consistent with this, Benjamin does not extend a panoramic gaze,
in the third person; he does not liken himself to the ego cogito in any of the various guises this intellectual formula has assumed. It is, however, simplistic to define him, for this reason, as a man of letters rather than a philosopher. Instead, he transforms the skepticism that Derrida proved to be rooted in the optical senses—doubt arises while I focus my gaze on the object that I hold in my sight17—into an anti-systematic criterion through which the investigation is oriented toward the ways knowledge-practices express themselves materially. Therefore, the authentic reception of Benjamin’s thought resists any attempt to situate it in a cultural tradition defined not as a point of exchange between generations but as a classification of a patrimony of knowledge.18

The genealogy in which Benjamin can be included is, if anything, posthumous, in the sense suggested by Borges in his famous passage on precursors: “The word precursor is indispensable in the vocabulary of criticism, but one should try to purify it from every connotation of patronage or rivalry. The fact is that each writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our concept of the past, as it will modify the future.”19 The very notion of a precursor is, in fact, captured in the recognition of nonsensical similarities between different texts by different authors. Finally, even though the critiques of encyclopedic knowledge and of the notion of a lowest common denominator that homogenizes the specificities of phenomena seem to be instilled in those scholars who share Benjamin’s intellectual posture, we can’t assume that a return to his work is anything more than a scholastic exercise, because Benjamin’s method is not a “set of warnings”20 aiming to define a hierarchical relationship between science and knowledge. What is and will remain at stake in his work is the relationship between thought, experience, and their historical forms, now that “the representative system of knowledge that once tied together the objectivity of human understanding and the autonomy of the external world has lost its ability to provoke thought.”21

Translated by Steve Baker

73. Benjamin writes to Schlemihl: “I am convinced that tradition is the medium in which the person who is learning continually transforms himself into the person who is teaching. . . . Anyone who has not learned cannot educate, for he does not recognize the point at which he is alone and where he thus encompasses the tradition in his own way and makes it communicable by teaching. Knowledge becomes transmissible only for the person who has understood his knowledge as something that has been transmitted. He becomes free in an unprecedented way. . . . Theory is like a raging sea, but the only thing that matters to the wave (understood as a metaphor for the person) is to surrender itself in motion in such a way that it creates and breaks.” (see note 10, September 1937, St. Moritz, letter no. 51, p. 94)
74. The direct reference is to Kafka. L. L. Borgen, “Kafka and His Precursors,” in Other Inquisitions, trans. R. L. C. Sinns (New York, 1964), p. 108. See the “secret agreement between past generations and the peasants” in Benjamin (see note 16), thesis II.
75. Benjamin (see note 41), p. 41