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Double Take.
Palimpsestic Writing and Image-Character in Benjamin's
Late Prose

One of the most persistently understudied problems in Benjamin's work remains the question of the structuring elements within what he called the »mobile and contradictory whole« of his thought (GB IV, 412).¹ Benjamin himself provided a number of figures for such structures: constellations, dialectical images, chronicles. Yet few attempts have been made to discern concrete constellations within Benjamin's work itself.² This is finally, of course, the site at which questions of the practice of writing intertwine with questions of the practice of reading. Yet little thought has been given as to the actual process through which constellations or dialectical images, formed of discrete bits of texts and images, emerge in the concrete practice of reading Benjamin. In terms of a reading practice, what is the now of the image's recognizability, what is the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded? As any reader of Benjamin soon learns, the process of reading any one text is constantly interrupted by a particular interference – the recognition, memory, intuition, or even anticipation of the citationality of a passage, its reference to other related passages, its relative or absolute dependence upon a series of passages in other texts – in short by the recognition of its partiality and instability. This is too often the price of the encounter with the Benjaminian practice of writing: its near-absolute resistance to stasis, to self-identity and the concurrent commitment to slippage away from identity and meaning.³ At an interpretive extreme, then,

1 For many years, Benjamin scholars observed a rigid dichotomy between his early »Romantic« work and his late »Marxist« work. See for the first systematic demonstration of the continuities between the early and late work, what one might call the »unity thesis«: Michael Jennings: *Dialectical Images. Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*, Ithaca (Cornell University Press) 1987. Uwe Steiner's: *Die Geburt der Kritik aus dem Geiste der Kunst: Untersuchungen zum Begriff der Kritik in den frühen Schriften Walter Benjamins*, Würzburg (Königshausen & Neumann) 1989, by concentrating on the key transitional years in the mid-1920s, demonstrated key aspects of this continuity. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the *Gesammelte Briefe* and the *Gesammelte Schriften* are my own.

2 For a preliminary attempt, see my »On the Banks of a New Lethe: Commodification and Experience in Benjamin's Baudelaire Book,« in: *boundary 2*, 1 (2003) 30, p. 89–104.

3 Paul De Man's work has been especially influential in this regard. See esp.: »Conclusions. Walter Benjamin's ›The Task of the Translator,« in: *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press) 1986, p. 73–105.

the result is the enticement to freeplay, the dehistoricized citation of the *Trauerspiel* book to the effect that »anything can mean anything else« (GS I, 350). There are, however, a number of constructive factors at work that impose limits to infinite slippage, to radical polysemy in Benjamin. Meaning does arise only as the reader follows the trace of citation down what Breton has called »paths overgrown with desire;« yet, as the reader gradually traces these networks of citations, the constellation itself is constituted precisely as the resulting network, a mental construct that is subject to verification.

Benjamin's practice of citation is itself of course extremely complex. The best-known usage is perhaps the practice of anonymous self-citation, the quotation within one text of a passage from another Benjaminian text without any attribution other than the occasional, ironic »a left-wing author has written.« The present essay, however, concerns a very specific Benjaminian structuring practice that is related to citation but is finally fundamentally different: the practice of rewriting. I refer here to a practice in which Benjamin produces a text that is more than a series of references to an earlier text, but is instead a systematic, architectonic rewriting of the earlier text's structures, forms, and matter. The essay »Experience and Poverty« provides a preliminary, localized example. There, a generation standing in a technologized landscape experiences, »in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body« (SW II, 732; GS II, 214). »Experience and Poverty,« by any account a central meditation on the experience of a generation that had survived World War I, in fact at key junctures condenses and rewrites the concluding text of Benjamin's *One Way Street*, »To the Planetarium.« There, the technologized landscape that emerged during World War I is evoked in considerable detail: »Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth« (SW I, 486; GS IV, 147). »To the Planetarium,« like »Experience and Poverty,« is a meditation on a new human form that comes to be only in this landscape. With its ecstatic, troubling evocation of a collective, technologized physis convulsed by »the paroxysm of genuine cosmic experience,« Benjamin's earlier text does not merely haunt »Experience and Poverty:« it provides the later text with its language, structure, and context. In an important sense, »Experience and Poverty« is a rewriting of »To the Planetarium.«

Benjamin himself made frequent, if oblique, reference to this practice of rewriting. In the section »Chinese Curios« from *One Way Street*, the narrative voice provides an extensive description of the material nature of a particular practice of writing:

The power of a country road when one is walking along it is different from the power it has when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text when it is read is different from the power it has when it is copied out. [...] Only the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text. [...] The Chinese practice of copying books was thus an incomparable guarantee of literary culture, and the transcript a key to China's enigmas. (SW I, 447 f.; GS IV, 90)

Benjamin was of course himself an adept in the practice of inserting enigmas into his texts; and he suggests here that the »key« to many such enigmas lies in the simple fact that many of his texts are »copies« of earlier texts, produced by the rewriting of the precursor in an ostensibly new form. In the introductory pages to the essay on *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, he offers an even more specific vision of the relationship that can obtain between the precursor text and its rewriting. There, the critic is famously compared to a »paleographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the lineaments of a more powerful script which refers to that text« (SW I, 298; GS I, 125). This is of course a rather precise description of the relationship that obtains between »Experience and Poverty« and »To the Planetarium«: the sober, memorable limning of the new forms of experience in the later essay – that »more powerful script« – »refers« to that »faded« text which underlies it. These and many similar citations are usually interpreted as fundamentals of Benjamin's critical practice, major elements of his approach to all texts. They are, however, better understood as descriptions of Benjamin's own practice of writing. What I have termed »rewriting« is, as this quotation reveals, finally a form of »palimpsestic writing.« At key moments in his career, Benjamin's most important texts – those texts that organize and inform a broad range of other texts – reappear, rewritten, in new language. A central structuring element within Benjamin's oeuvre, then, is a practice of rewriting as superscription; the production of a »new« text atop the foundations of a previous one. This fundamental structural situation helps explain the predominance in Benjamin's texts of figures and images of the return to an originary scene of writing: such figures and images point »down« toward the precursor text upon which the present text is based.

It is no accident that the figuration of rewriting as copying is an image from *One Way Street*. This apparently casual assemblage of small, rather belletristic texts – still some of the least explored terrain in all of Benjamin – is in important ways the key to all of Benjamin's later writing, and especially that writing based on the form of the *Denkbild* or figure of thought. In what follows, I will concentrate on one set of paired examples in order to demonstrate in a more focused way the practice

of rewriting and its effects: on the relationship between *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and *One Way Street*.

When Benjamin turned, in 1938, to the rewriting of the *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, which had begun to take shape as a recasting of the »Berlin Chronicle« in 1932 and had assumed a provisionally complete form by 1934, he did a number of things that continue to puzzle his editors and readers. He submitted a number of the texts to extensive revision; he added two new pieces; and he eliminated nine – including some that are now among the best known of Benjamin's *Denkbilder*. And, while the texts that make up the *Childhood* may have been arranged in an order as early as 1934, we have no firm evidence of that order; the only order accessible to us is the one imposed in 1938 in the so-called »Handexemplar Komplet.«⁴ If I can summarize my central contention: this revision was undertaken with two purposes. First, Benjamin sought to align the final version of the *Childhood* as a rewriting of *One Way Street*, such that key sections of the *Childhood* not only take up the themes and forms but actually occur at approximately the same point in the text as their corresponding images in *One Way Street*. And second, he sought to organize every one of the texts that make up the *Childhood* around a particular understanding of photography. I will contend that the image character that is so central to the *Denkbilder* in the final version of the *Childhood* is essentially photographic.

»Loggias,« the first *Denkbild* in the collection, is often read as a moving and notably atmospheric evocation of the loss of a particular place: the courtyards and *Loggien* of the *Großbürgerliche Wohnungen* of Berlin's old west.⁵ In those courtyards, as Winfried Menninghaus has shown, dwells a mythic knowledge to which the narrative voice is not yet equal.⁶ But this dark knowledge in *the Berlin Childhood* is radically contingent upon a very particular situation of viewing: photographic viewing. For, in the first, and most subtle of Benjamin's evocations of pre-cinematic photographic technologies in the text, the *Loggia* itself, with its box-like form and its shutters, is not merely a figure for a theatrical loge, but for a view camera.⁷

4 This is the inscription on the first, handwritten page of a typescript produced in Paris in 1938. The composition history of the *Berlin Childhood* is extremely complex: for an exhaustive survey that emphasizes the status of the text as a work in progress, see Davide Giuriato: *Mikrographien. Zu einer Poetologie des Schreibens in Walter Benjamins Kindheitserinnerungen (1932–1939)*, München (Fink) 2006, p. 7–84.

5 The first attempt to evoke this atmosphere was Marleen Stoessel's in: *Aura, Das vergessene Menschliche. Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin*, München (Hanser) 1983.

6 Winfried Menninghaus: *Schwellenkunde. Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos*, Frankfurt a. M. (Suhrkamp) 1986, p. 26–58.

7 For a full reading of the media-theoretical implications of the figuration of photography in the *Berlin Childhood*, see Michael Jennings: »The Mausoleum of Youth: Between Experience and Nihilism in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*,« *Paragraph*, 32 (2009) 3, p. 313–330.

The *Denkbilder* of the *Berlin Childhood* are indeed, as Benjamin claims in the untitled introduction to the text, »the images in which the experience of the big city is precipitated in a child of the middle class«; yet that very precipitation is neither a generalized nor a historically inspecific process: these images are precipitated as images through the means of the photographic apparatus (SW III, 344; GS VII, 385). Photographic metaphors are in fact everywhere in the *Childhood*. The murky light that characterizes image after image is the light of early photography. The liquid that oozes below the earth's surface and courses beneath the otter is a figure for photographic developer, something with the potential to reveal the latent images precipitated in the text. And, as Eduardo Cadava has shown, the photographic flash recurs repeatedly as a figure for the »now of recognizability.«⁸

»Loggias« serves as the programmatic introduction to the problem of photography as technological inscription in the *Berlin Childhood*, the exact pendant to the first piece in *One Way Street*, »Filling Station.« »Filling Station« announces, self reflexively, that the text to come will be composed of apparently inconsequential bits of a »prompt language,« and does so by comparing the functioning of that language to that of a constructivist machine – a turbine that requires oil on its hidden »spindles and joints« (SW I, 444; GS IV, 85). »Loggias,« in parallel, announces to the reader that a revelatory knowledge may well be something we cannot understand, but that it is something that can be made visible only through recourse to modern media – by applying oil to the joints and spindles of the loggia cum view camera.

The two montage essays taken together, then, comprise a very particular, palimpsestic architecture. The *Berlin Childhood*, that »more powerful script,« proves to be translucent, luminous, and porous – only to invoke some of the more powerful figures associated with a Benjaminian architectural language. The two texts bear, then, the same kind of relationship to one another as that evoked between original and translation in »The Task of the Translator:« »A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light [...]. For if the sentence is the wall before language of the original, literalness is the arcade« (SW I, 260; GS IV, 19). Benjamin's theory of translation thus proposes translation itself as yet another mode of the rewriting of an originary text, a rewriting that allows for a full, reciprocal luminosity between its elements.

Given the architectural figuration of translation in »The Task of the Translator,« it should come as no surprise that both the *Childhood* and *One Way Street* turn immediately to the problem of architectural form. In the second piece in the *Childhood*, »Imperial Panorama,« the enclosed space of the panorama is evoked, a space

8 Cadava's important arguments regarding the photographicity of Benjamin's late epistemology are in his *Words of Light. Theses on the Photography of History*, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 1997.

in which a paradoxical form of photographic seeing takes place. Seated before the horizontal viewing screen, the viewer nonetheless looks »through a double window into the faintly tinted depths of the image« (SW III, 346 f.; GS VII, 388). By looking straight ahead, then, the viewer actually looks down. It is as if the mirror of this apparatus for the presentation of photographic images had redirected vision downward and through a transparent floor in order to see what is below. This sense of what is housed »underneath« is of course at work in the notion of the palimpsest. And what lies underneath the floor of the *Berlin Childhood* is that deeper, subterranean floor of *One Way Street*. After the second text of *One Way Street*, »Breakfast Room,« announces the thematics of dreaming and vision »down there,« the third section, »Number 113« has a subsection called »Cellar.« »What horrible cabinet of curiosities lies there below,« asks the narrative voice, »where the deepest shafts are reserved for what is most commonplace?« In those deepest shafts, this voice discovers the corpse of »my best friend from my school days« (SW I, 445; GS IV, 86). This is the corpse of Fritz Heinle, Benjamin's friend who took his own life in the »Heim« of the *Freideutsche Jugend* at the outbreak of World War I, a vision that never departed from Benjamin's writing. Just as the narrative voice discovers this deeply buried yet determinative corpse at the outset of the text, the narrative voice of the *Berlin Childhood* finds this body again, as it were, and several times: at the end of the first *Denkbild*, »Loggias,« where »the child who was once their confederate [...] dwells in his loggia, [...] as in a mausoleum long intended just for him« (SW III, 346; GS VII, 388). And again, in the programmatic conclusion to the *Childhood*, »The Moon,« the child experiences an intensely identificatory moment when, awakened at night from his slumber, he rises from bed, haunted by the »fear of finding myself already stretched out upon it.« Photographic viewing takes the reader of the *Childhood* downward and into a very particular crypt.⁹

Heinle's though, is not the only body buried beneath the surface of the *Berlin Childhood*. That text's transparent floor, in revealing *One Way Street* as its cellar, reveals a foundation absolutely littered with bodies. It is in fact Goethe's body and disembodied voice that most often haunts these images.¹⁰ He is present and named in the subsections of »Number 113« that follow: visible in the dreamcellar sitting at his desk in his study, he gives the narrator an urn and accompanies him to a meal beside his family and ancestors. The great ancestor bequeaths, then, not inspiration but the intimation of mortality – the intimation of the child's mausoleum in the *Childhood*. But Goethe is present in »Imperial Panorama,« too; his voice seems

9 For an influential account of the relationship between »surface« and »buried« texts – a »cryptonomy« – see Nicolas Abraham/Maria Torok: *The Wolf Man's Magic Word. A Cryptonomy*, Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press) 2005.

10 On the notion of textual haunting, see esp. Avital Ronell: *Dictations. On Haunted Writing*, Champagne/Urbana (University of Illinois Press) 2006.

to have floated up to a position just below the floor. As the panorama is about to move in order to shift the viewer's gaze from image to image, a little bell rings, and the apparatus turns, shuddering, not to a new image but to an empty space, a void. And in this non-space, this non-time, an everlasting, inspecific present is figured. Not just the eternal present of Kafka's country doctor, condemned to be pulled forever in the everlasting now by two white horses as his fur coat flaps in the wind, but the eternal present of Goethe's »Willkommen und Abschied.« That present as void that exists within the panorama is »suffused with the ache of departure,« the moment in Goethe's poem where the preterite gives way, fleetingly, to a present tense in which literally nothing happens but in which an anticipation of longing resides: »But ah! Already with the morning sun / departure constricts my heart : / In your kisses what rapture! / In your eyes what pain!« (Doch ach, schon mit der Morgensonne / Verengt der Abschied mir das Herz: / In deinen Küssen welche Wonne! / In deinem Auge welcher Schmerz!; trans. M. W. J.).

This eternal present – figured architecturally as immuration or interment – returns in the third section of the *Childhood*, »Victory Column.« The drum that forms the base of the column is another form of closed yet transparent architectural space, now the mausoleum not of childhood, but of world history: »What could possibly come after Sedan anyway? With the defeat of the French, world history seemed to be safely interred in its glorious grave, and this column was the funerary stele.« It is not as if, though, the sepulchral character of the victory column exists independently: it is in fact the child's vision that constructs the very particular nature of the column. Looking up from below, the child sees »people [...] standing there up above. Against the sky they appeared to me outlined in black, like the little figures in paste-on picture sheets. Once I had the buildings in place, didn't I take up scissors and glue-pot to distribute mannikins like these at doorways, niches, and windowsills?« (SW III, 348 f.; GS VII, 389 f.). If »Loggias« theorized the production of individual images, their precipitation through the camera, and their provision of a knowledge that we can see but not understand, »Victory Column« theorizes the construction of the *Childhood* itself out of the juxtaposition of these images. The reference to the scissors and glue-pot is of course a direct reference to the montage practices of the Berlin Dadaists, their construction of flattened architectural spaces – *Klebebilder* – from violently excised shards of images drawn from the illustrated magazines. The specific analogy to the constructive principle of the photomontage suggests not just the relationship of the various texts within the *Childhood* as constellation or dialectical image, but insists upon the photographic nature of the images themselves.

»Victory Column,« too, rewrites its doubled text from *One Way Street*, »Construction Site.«¹¹

For children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one. (SW I, 449 f.; GS IV, 95)

Here, too, Benjamin interweaves a complex political allegory – not Sedan, but the construction of the Weimar Republic out of the waste products of Empire, out of materials that could not have served the powerful – with a self-reflexive meditation on the uses of montage.

If the structural and thematic relationship of *One Way Street* to the *Berlin Childhood* demonstrated here is pervasive, this does not mean that Benjamin's formal strategies in the individual sections of the two texts are identical. *One Way Street* is constructed on the basis of an early form of the *Denkbild*, conceived as a textual form that fuses elements of the practices and forms of the historical avant-gardes – dada, constructivism, and a nascent surrealism – with the tradition of the aphorism and the scope and wit of the feuilleton.¹² As these remarks have indicated, though, the sections of the *Berlin Childhood* are conceived and produced in explicit analogy to the photographic image. This is not to say, of course, that Benjamin in some sense attempts to create »textual photographs«; he attempts, instead, to create texts that aspire to the conditions of legibility of the photograph.¹³ What exactly,

11 There are several sections of *One Way Street* between »Number 113« and »Construction Site.« »Standard Clock« has its parallel in »The Telephone«: both deal with the intervention of modern technologies in traditional living practices. Even more tellingly, the brilliant set-piece »Manorially Furnished Ten-Room Apartment« in *One Way Street* has its counterpart in »Tiergarten.« Both texts deal with the deciphering of irrational spaces: the bourgeois apartment for the adult, the labyrinth of paths and possibilities for the child. On the decoding of irrational spaces in Benjamin, see esp. Tom Gunning: »The Exterior as *Intérieur*. Benjamin's Optical Detective,« *boundary 2*, 1 (2003) 30, p. 105–130.

12 On the relationship between the *Denkbild* and the aesthetic forms of the historical avant-garde, see Michael Jennings: »Walter Benjamin and the European avant-garde« in: David Ferris (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2004, p. 18–34. On the *Denkbild* form itself, see Gerhard Richter: *Thought-Images. Frankfurt School Writer's Reflections from Damaged Life*, Stanford (Stanford University Press) 2007.

13 On the issue of photographic legibility, and especially on Benjamin's use of Siegfried Kracauer's essay »Photography« in his conceptualization of the texts in the *Berlin Childhood*, see Jennings: »The Mausoleum of Youth« (note: 7).

though, is the photographic character of these images that must be read? An answer emerges if we compare the conclusions of the two books under consideration. The final section of *One Way Street*, »To the Planetarium« specifically deploys eschatological categories in its invocation of a new form of human contact with the cosmos.¹⁴ The new, technologized physis, the body politic, transcends the destruction of mankind only insofar as it is galvanized by the energy released in that very destruction and transforms it into the power of procreation. Compared to this sweeping, impassioned vision, »The Moon,« one of the last images in the *Berlin Childhood*, seems a mere domestic set-piece: a Proustian moment of a child waking in its room, estranged from its surroundings by the dim moonlight that steals through the blinds. This *Denkbild*, though, is a carefully constructed photographic pendant to »Loggias« and as such frames the photographic figuration that is the key formal aspect of the text as a whole. As in »Loggias,« domestic architecture is figured in »The Moon« as an optical apparatus. A pale beam of moonlight steals into the chamber through the shutter-like blinds – and if we are not quite reminded of a view camera, with its orientation toward its object, the bedroom with its darkened interior nonetheless strongly suggest the pre-photographic form of the *camera obscura*, with its very direct light writing, *photo graphein*, on its rear wall. »The Moon,« in fact, is a virtually symphonic reiteration and refunctioning of the major motifs of the *Berlin Childhood* as a whole: the notion of mimetic exchange between child and butterfly so prominent in »Butterfly Hunt« and elsewhere emerges immediately as the earth and the moon become interchangeable; the circular forms – of the tree ring in »Loggias« and of the market women's skirts in »Market Hall« – return in the hem-like ornamentation of the basins on the nightstand; and the clinking of the glass jug recalls the sounds of modern technology – the shuddering of the panorama, the shrilling of the telephone – that so undoes the subject. A mythic knowledge is very much at work, then, in this room: the child awakens in a space bathed in an eerie glow that literally unhouses him. Stripped of any thought of a future, the child is again, as in »Loggias,« entombed, trapped within the irremediable pastness of the photograph. »The Moon« is, in fact, for all its character as a domestic miniature, a great apocalyptic vision. In the moonlit room, »nothing more remained of the world than a single, stubborn question. It was: Why is there anything at all in the world, why the world? With amazement, I realized that nothing in it could compel me to think the world. Its nonbeing would have struck me as not a whit more problematic than its being, which seemed to wink at nonbeing« (SW III, 383; GS VII, 428). The view camera in the loggia produces

14 On the role of eschatological thought in Benjamin's »theological politics« in the early and mid-1920s, see Michael Jennings: »Toward Eschatology. The Development of Benjamin's Theological Politics in the 1920's,« in: Ben Morgan/Anthony Phelan (eds.): *Benjamin and Anthropology*, Freiburg i.Br. (Rombach) 2011.

a photographic image of the child entombed in the courtyard; the *camera obscura* in the moonlit bedroom produces a much more general photographic image of the threat of nothingness. The threat, in other words, of a radical illegibility.

Two conceptions of the role and functioning of modern media are in fact interwoven in Benjamin's late work. The better known of the two is dominated by a technological utopianism evident in Benjamin's work from his earliest encounters with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in the early 1920s. On this view, most evident in the various versions of »The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,« the proper application of modern media, such that they serve the »production« of new, heretofore unsuspected relationships between the elements of the lived world and not the mere »reproduction« of the relationships that seem to obtain under conditions of phantasmagoria, might lead to the reformation of the *human sensorium* – and through that to social change. Thus any recognition of the conditions that actually dominate our lives and any impulse toward social change that might follow from that recognition must be contingent upon this very sensorial reformation. Opposed to this view is a darker vision, most evident in the *Berlin Childhood*, in which modern media and especially photography reveal themselves as complicit with the regnant forces of oppression. As Benjamin's companion in the invention of popular culture as a serious field of study, Siegfried Kracauer, put it: »In the hands of the ruling society, the invention of illustrated magazines is one of the most powerful means of organizing a strike against understanding.«¹⁵ The best modern media can achieve is a recognition of the manner in which they serve to entrap and entomb. This latter vision is irrevocably associated with the strains of nihilism that course through Benjamin's work.

With some sense of Benjamin's practice of rewriting—and of the photographic character of the images of the *Berlin Childhood* – behind us, let us now turn to the issue with which we started the discussion of that text: with its revision in 1938. Despite the extensive architectonic and thematic relationship that obtains between *One Way Street* and the *Berlin Childhood*, there are central differentiations between them that bear on the question of this revision. In addition to the formal differences between the kinds of texts that make up *One Way Street* and the *Berlin Childhood*, which we might characterize as an »avantgarde aphorism« versus the »textualization of the photographic image,« there is also a crucial difference in the degree of discursivity that characterizes each text. *One Way Street* juxtaposes its figures of thought with a series of highly prescriptive formulations on the relationship of writing and modern media. *One Way Street* is in fact a handbook – what Benjamin in »Little History of Photography« would call a »training manual« – of modern writing practices. Some of the theorization of writing is figurative, as

15 Siegfried Kracauer: »Photography,« in: Thomas Y. Levin (ed.): *The Mass Ornament*, Cambridge (Harvard University Press) 1995, p. 58.

my discussion of »Chinese Curios« and »Construction Site« has suggested. But much more of it is direct and abstract: in key sections such as »Attested Auditor of Books,« »Teaching Aid: Principles of the Weighty Tome, or How to Write Fat Books,« and »Post No Bills: The Writer's Technique in Thirteen Theses,« Benjamin theorizes very explicitly the sources, scene, production, dissemination, and reception of the written text. The *Berlin Childhood*, by contrast, eliminates all direct theorization related to its own production; it eschews, in fact, all ekphrasis, all direct representation of photographs themselves. A central principle of the 1938 revision was thus clearly the elimination of every text that made direct reference to photographs, including the famous description of Benjamin's own childhood image and his conflation of that image with a photograph of the young Franz Kafka in a photographer's studio. Let us examine just one example of this. In 1933, Benjamin still intended to make »Die Mummerehlen« the first piece in the *Childhood*. And in 1933, »Die Mummerehlen« contained a section that described a photograph of Benjamin as a child.¹⁶ In summer 1933, though, Benjamin already began to think about replacing »Die Mummerehlen« with »Loggias,« which he had just written: »I will probably place [»Loggias«], instead of that photographic piece that is contained in »The Mummerehlen«, at the front of the book« (GB IV, 275). He would replace, then, an explicitly ekphrastic text with one in which photography emerges only metaphorically – through the figure of the loggia itself. Rather than rely, then, upon ekphrasis, Benjamin builds his text up out of textual images that are suffused with the metaphors of photography. The images in the *Childhood* do not strive to attain the status of photographs, but to approximate, through an interlinked series of photographic metaphors, the conditions of legibility of photographs. If *One Way Street* is a training manual for writers, the *Childhood* is a training manual for the reading of images, or rather for the reading of textual images as if they were photographs.

In 1932, as he was beginning to work on the series of autobiographical texts that would culminate in the 1938 revision of the *Berlin Childhood*, Benjamin produced, as part of that textual complex, a small theoretical text he called »Excavation and Memory.«¹⁷ »Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that

¹⁶ In the course of revising the text, Benjamin combined this section with his account of a photograph of the young Franz Kafka.

¹⁷ On the relationship of this text to the textual complex of Benjamin's writings on childhood and memory, see Giuriato: *Mikrographien* (note 4), p. 77–85.

which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried.« The *Berlin Childhood* is of course Benjamin's most important attempt to capture memory in the distanced, displaced medium of language. And »Excavation and Memory« contains a very specific description of the particular practice that would shape and finally determine the *Childhood*: the practice of rewriting. »He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the 'matter itself' is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation.« The »man digging« is the autobiographical writer who finds his »matter« not so much in the disembodied archive of his memory as in prior texts that, over the years, become the strata of his past. »In this sense, for authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them.« And for the *Childhood*, that site is *One Way Street*. Through his systematic redeployment and rewriting of the »lower strata« of that earlier text, Benjamin is able to give »an account of the strata which first had to be broken through« and in so doing created the text that is arguably his masterpiece.

»Excavation and Memory« is nothing less than a proleptic theorization of the practice of rewriting that Benjamin would realize only in 1938, with the revision of the *Berlin Childhood*. The little text marks, quite precisely, the site at which Benjamin gained possession of a kind of ancient treasure. On first reading an elaborate archaeological figure for the workings of memory, »Excavation and Memory« emerges, on any rereading that acknowledges the importance of rewriting in Benjamin's oeuvre, as a remarkable meditation on the time and space that can bind two related texts. The construction of dialectical images in the concrete practice of writing is, then, a more complex practice than the mere interrelation of disparate citations. Some of those citations are, as it were, pre-structured, doubled, and written over. It is up to the reader and her »cautious probing« to discover those intermediate strata that alone can yield an adequate – and perhaps revelatory – knowledge.