UNFORGIVING REMEMBRANCE

The Concept and Practice of Eingedenken in Walter Benjamin's Late Work

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Ph.D.

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Ph.D. dissertation, 2001
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Abstract

The aim of this study is to develop an integrated perspective on Benjamin's philosophy of memory. Although nowhere subjected to a substantial treatise in its own right, the theme of memory occupies a ubiquitous position in Benjamin's late authorship. It plays a central role in his works of literary criticism, in his studies of material culture, in his sociology of modernity, in his philosophy of history, and in his quest to politicize the past through a controversial fusion of historical materialism and theology.

The focal point of the study is the concept of Eingedenken - a neologism which Benjamin first employs in translation of Proust's mémoire involontaire but which in the course of the 1930s becomes associated with a "Copernican revolution" in the philosophy of memory. The thesis argues that Benjamin employs Eingedenken in a "systematically oriented" fashion to distinguish a concept of memory that is true to the experience of modernity (characterized by a prevalence of shock phenomena and a decentring of subjectivity) and that posits a radical obligation to the past paradoxically as a means of
activating the present. The important conceptual counterpart to this is Hegel’s concept of Erinnerung. Like the latter, Eingedenken displays a dialectical structure, but it does this in accordance with Benjamin’s notion of “dialectics at a standstill.” Against the mediating, conciliatory thrust of Erinnerung, Eingedenken remains true to suffering in the past by refusing reconciliation with past wrongs.

Structurally, the study is divided into two main parts with three chapters each. Chapters 1 - 3 develop the context of Benjamin’s philosophy of memory and chapters 4 - 6 develop the concept of Eingedenken. The contextualizing chapters examine, firstly, the general parameters of Benjamin’s politics of the past; secondly, the Hegelian backdrop to this; and thirdly, Benjamin’s analysis of experience in the context of modernity. The three chapters on the concept of Eingedenken, in turn, examine a moment identifying Eingedenken as involuntary memory; a moment oriented towards seizing the involuntary; and a moment of mobilizing Eingedenken as a political/redemptive force. Benjamin identifies Eingedenken as a weak messianic power; the present study probes the implications of this.
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Preamble

Sie Haben Etwas Vergessen

Reflections on the inscription on a World War II bunker on the West Coast of Denmark

All along the Danish West Coast, from Skagen in the north to the German border in the south, there is a row of massive cement bunkers spaced regularly about 50-100 meters apart. These last remnants of the German occupation were built during World War II - largely by unemployed Danes with funds appropriated from the Danish national treasury. Designed to withstand British air raids, the bunkers are virtually indestructible, but due to an imperceptible surge of wind, water, and sand, and possibly also to a slight encroachment of the North Sea on the mainland Jutland, they migrate slowly into the ocean. In 50 years they have come down to the waterfront from their strategic location on top of the dunes; give another 50 years and the great majority will no doubt be buried under water, safely out of sight. But in the meanwhile, for as long as these formidable traces of the past still last,
their massive concrete planes issue an open invitation to graffiti. Not far to the north of the cottage where I once retreated to compose an initial draft of these reflections on the philosophy of memory, one is greeted by an inscription in German issuing the reminder of a forgetting. Printed in large red capital letters it looks something like this:

SIE HABEN ETWAS VERGEŞSEN

"You have forgotten something." Today, as the beaches are crowded with tourists from both sides of the border, such a statement still taps into many raw emotions. Its deliberate vagueness renders it all the more evocative, investing it with multiple layers of potential meaning. To the majority of bypassers it no doubt reads as a statement of unsettled accounts between occupiers and occupied, intended to cast a gloomy shadow over the friendly commercial interaction of their descendants. Yet I suspect that to many it echoes an internal Danish affair as well, recalling a difficult legacy of war-time activity in a hazy zone between legitimate self-protection and outright collaboration. Around the time of the 50th anniversary of the post-war trials and bitter settling of accounts, the issues which once divided the nation are still alive.

In opening my discussion of certain contemporary issues in the philosophy of memory with this example of graffiti art, it is not my intention to dwell on the rights and wrongs of World War II history. Rather, I call attention to it because it prefigures several of
the most important themes which I shall pursue in the present study. To a considerable extent, this is due precisely to the vagueness with which the past is invoked on the wall of the bunker: as we read the literal inscription, we spontaneously supply a number of associations which, upon examination, trace the parameters of a key conceptual tension in the contemporary philosophy of memory.

What does it mean to inscribe the accusation of a forgetting on a surface which by its physical presence obviously and inescapably recalls the very segment of the past that is alleged to have been forgotten? What does this tell us about the entanglement and intricacies of remembering and forgetting? To begin to unravel this paradox, we must note, firstly, that the forgetting in question is unmistakably presented as a moral failure. The graffiti reads as a reproach. Whatever it is that has been forgotten, the reader is left in no doubt that it ought not to have been, i.e. ought to have been remembered - whatever that means. Aside from this, nothing about the graffiti is clear. Every term in the phrase is ambiguous. Who "SIE" (you) is depends on who reads the inscription and feels personally affected - unless, of course we construe it as a third person plural pronoun, in which case the forgetting in question is the problem of somebody else. What "ETWAS" (something) is taken to mean depends at least to some degree on who the subject of forgetting is, but even if we supply a concrete interpretation of this, the phrase "etwas" lends an unsettling aspect to the graffiti, hinting at something indeterminate, "something" that eludes specification.

What is of special interest in our present connection is that "VERGESSEN HABEN" too, i.e. the very nature of the forgetting in question, is left uncertain. As is preserved in the English translation, the phrase attains much of its evocative power by a pun
on a dual meaning of the verb "to forget." On the one hand, it invokes a more or less standard meaning of the verb "zu vergessen," which is a forgetting in the sense of *ignoring, eradicating from consciousness, not being mindful of, or no longer paying heed to* something. Spontaneously supplying this sense of the verb, we read the inscription on the bunker as exclaiming that "there is something you have left out of the going historical narrative, something in the past to which you no longer pay sufficient heed." Simultaneous with this, however, "vergessen" has the connotation of *misplacing or leaving something behind.* Viewed in this light the graffiti reads as a not-so-polite reminder (to the Germans, in German) that "you were here once before, remember, and you left a mess - what are these bunkers doing littering our beaches?"

Now, there is an obvious contradiction embedded in this dual meaning; the second reading of the phrase contradicts the first. Precisely because of that which has been left behind, the events of the war are *not* forgotten. The bunkers are right there in our faces as unforgiving reminders of the past (and it would not have been preferable had the occupying troops and their local collaborators actually cleaned up after themselves, i.e. effaced the traces of history; sadly, the troops of the Third Reich managed that all too well elsewhere). Thus, the surface belies the script. What is more, the phrasing of the graffiti fully takes this into account: no matter how we construe its overall sense, it is only intelligible if we ourselves supply a specific interpretation of "etwas." Which is to say that the graffiti presupposes a tacit awareness of what it is that has allegedly been forgotten. If "it" were effectively forgotten, obliterated from consciousness, the text would be meaningless. In this light, one might suggest that the author could as well have chosen to state in big red script
that there is "something you have not forgotten," "something you are tacitly aware of," or, to push the point even further, "something you remember." If this seems absurd, it is because the proposed revisions strip the slogan of its plaintive force; it would no longer be received as a moral reproach and would not conjure up unsettled accounts in the past. Yet the proposed revisions serve to alert us to the fact that the forgetting in question is more complicated than initially suspected. Most importantly, it is not incompatible with certain forms of remembrance. I will in the following attempt to demonstrate that this implicitly suggests a displacement of oppositions in the philosophy of memory.

In order to elucidate the conceptual shift in question we need to consider more carefully the nature of the mental activity invoked on the wall of the bunker - a mental activity which blurs the distinction between remembering and forgetting, which we recognize as a forgetting yet which bears a close affinity to remembering, and which the graffiti-artist presents as morally reprehensible. The first suggestion that comes to mind is that this must be a repression. This is not a bad interpretation. On most accounts, the notion of repression is associated with a forgetting in the basic sense indicated above (of ignoring, not paying heed to, narrative exclusion, or effacing from consciousness), yet it also involves an aspect of remembrance in so far as we remain tacitly, perhaps unconsciously, aware of the disturbing events in question. And in so far as repression of historical knowledge almost invariably involves an element of bad faith, it is subject to moral reproach. This would account for the plaintive force of the graffiti as well as its slightly uncanny, disturbing quality. In response to our attempt to disregard the past, it announces a return of the repressed.
While this interpretation clearly captures much of what is going on on the wall of my West Coast bunker, however, I believe that it cannot stand alone. It is insufficient because even as the graffiti censors any attempt to repress uncomfortable facts of history, it also speaks to visitors on the beach who cannot reasonably be accused of a repression.¹ The notion of repression suggests both a positive inability to confront certain events in the past and some kind of active effort (conscious or unconscious) to avoid it, and although this is surely a problem in the post-war era, as in the aftermath of any deep social trauma, I am not convinced it is the predominant one. Despite certain high profile instances of outright denial and falsification of history, the predominant tendency in text books as well as in the popular media, in political discourse and in public ceremonies, is conscientiously to attempt to reconcile the facts of the past with an affirmative vision of the present and the future. Especially in the anniversary decade of the 1990s, World War II events are endlessly being commemorated, and for some, visiting the site of the most remarkable monuments of the Danish occupation may well, in a small way, be a part of this. The point that I am driving at is that even so, we are not exempt from the implicit reproach in the writing on the bunker. One may well actively engage in remembrance and yet be affected by the charge “Sie haben

¹ It should probably be specified that I am here talking about repression not in the sense of a Freudian “Urverdrängung” (originary repression) but of what Lyotard (1990:11ff.) calls “secondary repression,” i.e. repression in a colloquial sense of more or less willfully - and in bad faith - avoiding confrontation with unpleasant aspects of reality. By invoking this notion, it is not my intention from the outset to cast my examination of memory predominantly in Freudian terms. As noted by James Young, it is in many ways highly problematic to extend the use of psychoanalytical concepts to the collective level (as is inevitably encountered in connection with an examination of the memory embodied in public memorials): “to suggest that a society 'represses' memory because it is not in its interest to remember, or because it is ashamed of this memory, is to lose sight of the many other social and political forces underpinning national memory” (Young 1993:xi).
etwas vergessen."

To take this possibility into account and thus more accurately identify the mental operation described on the wall of the bunker as a forgetting, I propose that the primary sense of "vergessen haben" should be construed as a neutralization of the past. The implication of this is that regardless of whether "remembered" or "forgotten," whether openly acknowledged or left out of the going historical narrative, the segment of the past in question is effectively rendered dormant, i.e. not an active force in the present. Phrased differently, the relationship between the past and the present has already been settled and stabilized. To the extent that the past is still recognized as somehow important, this now happens in a fixed and hence neutralized manner.

The mental function that I am calling neutralization overlaps in certain respects with what is commonly described as repression, yet the former is a broader concept which generally marks a more effective way of distancing oneself from the past and which in comparison with repression is more clearly indicative of the entanglement of remembrance and forgetting that was suggested by our graffiti. A very familiar technique of neutralizing the past is associated with colloquial expressions of reconciliation such as "don't worry about it, it's already forgotten" (which it isn't, of course, as long as we know what "it" means). Like the graffiti, such expressions identify neutralization as a forgetting, but it is important to recognize that the function of neutralization is also a feature of many familiar modes of remembrance. Thus, e.g., the therapeutic process of overcoming traumatic experiences is widely conceived as a recollection which can finally put the past to rest and thereby break compulsive patterns of repetition. Upon examination, one finds that the very
polarization of remembering and repetition, which is constitutive of a remarkably widespread discourse of memory, hinges on attributing a neutralizing effect to the narrative recollection of sequences of personal experience.

On a variation of the same theme, a pattern of forgetful remembrance is detectable in the psychological function described by Freud as *the work of mourning*. In mourning we focus our attention intensely on the deceased or departed, yet in the process our libidinal attachment to the former beloved is gradually loosened so as to make way for new bonds. When successful, the process of mourning neutralizes the absence of the beloved by relegating our active relationship with him or her to the past. We subsequently carry something with us from the relationship and loyally continue to remember when the occasion arises, but we do this in such a manner as to no longer interfere with present engagements. Interestingly, this type of neutralizing remembrance often involves aestheticizing events and acquaintances in the past. In so doing, we constitute the latter as objects of disinterested contemplation which we are able to view with affection and admiration precisely because of the distance imposed, i.e. because of their neutral status vis-à-vis the present.

In the public realm, a similar dynamic is brought into play when formerly divisive, potentially explosive issues are being commemorated on a communal scale. This too has a neutralizing effect in that the relationship between past and present is stabilized in favour of the status quo. The key here is to devise and periodically reenact a narrative rendition of events which reconciles or obfuscates existing social differences. Like in gestures of personal reconciliation, we often speak of this type of reconciliation as "forgetting" the
divisive issues in the past, but this is actually a peculiar linguistic usage since the forgetting in question is inextricably linked with a deliberate commemorative effort. Lyotard expresses an awareness of this entanglement of public remembrance and forgetting, I believe, in the remark that “a politics of forgetting indeed involve[s] erecting a memorial” (Lyotard 1990:4).

James Young makes a related point in the theoretical introduction to his rich and diverse study on the Texture of Memory as embodied in World War II memorials, monuments, countermonuments, and memorial spaces: “To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them” (Young 1993:5). The profound concern about such means of an anamnestic neutralization of the past carries over into Young’s call for a memory which not only moves but activates the visitors interacting with the memory sites in question: “The question is not, How are people moved by these memorials? but rather, To what end have they been moved, to what historical conclusions, to what understandings and actions in their own lives?” (ibid.:13). Young continues: “For were we passively to remark only the contours of these memorials, were we to leave unexplored their genesis and remain unchanged by the recollective act, it could be said that we have not remembered at all” (ibid.:15).

Although these various examples of neutralization and forgetful remembrance are each complex and should not be reduced to one and the same formula, they all in my view display an affinity with the type of forgetting that is being invoked - and censored - in our
graffiti text on the West Coast bunker. When we reconvene as tourists 50 years after the war at the site of one of the more heavily fortified fronts (albeit one of limited strategic importance), we pay heed to history - how could we not? - but we do it in a guarded way, without allowing these echoes of the past to affect our core self-conception. The inscription on the bunker echoes in return that accounts with the past may have been settled prematurely, that the books of history may have been closed too soon.

What, then, would a remembrance be like which could escape this logic? A remembrance which could resist neutralization and ideological manipulation? A memory that remains true to the past and yet attuned to the present. In contrast to the theme of neutralization, I propose to call this an actualizing memory. A different way of characterizing the same phenomenon would be to describe it as a memory that is on guard against its own inherent tendency to exploit and betray the past and thus also a memory which probes the limits of memory itself - a countermemory, a memory of that which is always being excluded, or, to borrow a phrase from Levinas, a memory of the immemorial.

At the risk of overinterpretation, I suggest that this is ultimately what is being called for by the paradoxical accusation of a forgetting inscribed on a surface of recollection, a forgetting lodged in the heart of commemoration itself. In elaborating some of the associations evoked by the Danish graffiti, I have provided a preliminary indication of the moral and political necessity of a concept of actualizing memory, but to describe in concrete detail what form such a remembrance might assume is a different matter; as opposed to the various shapes of neutralizing memory described above, its concept is not readily available but marks the site of an important conceptual innovation.
In recent years several studies have appeared which trace an approach to the philosophy of memory that is fundamentally consistent with the considerations presented here. An important example is the work by Jean-Francois Lyotard, already cited, entitled *Heidegger and the "jews"* - the jews being deliberately placed in scare quotes and written without capitalization in order to indicate that the subject of inquiry is not a particular people or a political or religious group but rather those who are always being excluded from society and from recognition in memory: "‘The jews’ are the object of a dismissal with which Jews, in particular, are afflicted in reality” (Lyotard 1990:3). Similarly, in *Of Memory, Reminiscence, and Writing: On the Verge*, David Farrell Krell presents a comprehensive examination of the occidental philosophy of memory from Plato to Heidegger and Derrida. As is indicated by the subtitle, the central theme of this study is memory continuously encountering its limits while always remaining "on the verge" of a remembrance of the immemorial.

My present study shares the same general aim of conceptualizing a memory that probes the limits of the immemorial, but it is devoted to an authorship which neither Lyotard nor Krell includes in their philosophical reviews. This is the work of Walter Benjamin, who during the decade and a half preceding World War II devoted much of his intellectual attention to reconceptualizing remembrance. I am going to argue that his concept of memory - generally presented under the label “Eingedenken” - marks a shift in the philosophy of memory from a central focus on the antithesis between remembrance and compulsive repetition to an opposition between neutralizing and actualizing the past, the latter of which, like the inscription on our World War II bunker, marks a return of the
repressed and hence a revival of a certain dynamic of repetition. Eingedenken, in Benjamin’s usage, denotes a concept of memory which resists premature reconciliation. It is at the same time a memory which resists neutralization by relentlessly exposing the effects of forgetting. In both respects, Benjamin’s commitment to rethinking memory is nourished by a dual instinct composed of a sense of obligation towards the past as well as a sense that it constitutes a formidable reservoir of creative, revolutionary energies. To honour this obligation and to draw on these energies, we must not prematurely “forget.”
Introduction

On the Concept of Memory in Benjamin’s Authorship

When Walter Benjamin addresses issues of memory, he very often employs the term “Eingedenken.” This is a neologism, although readily intelligible to the German-speaking ear. The word conjures up direct associations to the predicative adjective “eingedenk s·in” (to be mindful of) and recalls cognate nouns such as Gedenken (remembrance, commemoration) and Andenken (the act of honouring the memory of somebody or something; a reminder or souvenir), but in the substantive form as a verbal noun, “Eingedenken” is not part of standard German vocabulary. It is clear that the term antedates Benjamin himself - it thus appears, e.g., in Wagner’s 5th Wesendonk lied2 - and it may have

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2 The lyrics for these Lieder were written around 1858 by Wagner’s Zurich-based mistress Mathilde Wesendonk. The third stanza of the lied Träume reads:

Träume, die wie hehre Strahlen in die Seele sich versenken, dort ein ewig Bild zu malen: Allvergessen, Eingedenken!

Dreams, which like glorious rays lodge themselves in the soul there to paint an eternal image: all-forgetting, remembrance!
enjoyed a certain vogue in the Berlin of Benjamin’s youth, but nonetheless, the choice of terminology is sufficiently peculiar and consistent on Benjamin’s part to demand some sort of explanation.  

Why not stick with any of a number of German words denoting some aspect of memory, such as Gedächtnis, Erinnerung, Gedenken, Andenken, etc., or loan words in common usage such as, e.g., Reminiscenz? The fact is that Benjamin does employ these words as well, but usually not at the critical junctures of his philosophy of memory and not with the same specificity and persistence as Eingedenken. It is therefore reasonable to speculate that Benjamin deliberately employs the neologism to distinguish a particular concept of memory to which he attributes a special significance - what might be described

3 Shortly before completing this study it had been suggested to me (by Benjamin Taubald of the theology faculty at the University of Vienna) that the noun Eingedenken may have been fairly widely used during the first decades of the twentieth century in German Jewish academic circles as an equivalent of the Hebrew “Zakhor,” thus indicating a direct allusion to Jewish concepts of remembrance. While I have not been able to find concrete substantiation of this explanation, it would seem consistent with Benjamin’s use of the word as well as with the manner in which “Eingedenken” is later employed by associated thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno (cf., e.g., 1969:47, 87, et passim). The central analytical challenge remains, however, to account for the specificity of Benjamin’s concept of memory, since his appropriation of theological concepts and motifs is in every respect idiosyncratic and in need of elucidation.

4 None of these words translate directly into English. I have already remarked on some of the main connotations of Andenken and Gedenken; Erinnerung has numerous meanings in German but is probably the closest one comes to a generic word for memory. Gedächtnis denotes the mental faculty, i.e. the capacity for remembrance, and is often understood in a very basic, virtually mechanical sense. It may in this connection be remarked that Hegel employs both Erinnerung and Gedächtnis as technical terms. To him the former capacity is closely related to the structure of dialectical thinking, whereas the latter is identified as a mechanical form of memory that is integral to the capacity for language. These determinations will be further elaborated in Chapter 2. Benjamin, for his part, employs both Erinnerung and Gedächtnis as generic memory words, but he also associates Gedächtnis, e.g., with the “short-lived memory” of the storyteller.
as his "own" concept of memory. In a much cited fragment from an early *Passagenwerk* expose, he lays claim to a "Copernican turn" in the philosophy of memory ("die dialektische, kopernikanische Wendung des Eingedenkens," GS V:1058). In this light, one might be inclined to push the above argument a step further and suggest that Benjamin deliberately selects a neologism to indicate a conceptual innovation in the philosophy of memory; in other words, that "Eingedenken" is intended to signal a concept of memory adequate to the political and philosophical challenges of his own age.

Although Benjamin's use of terminology is not entirely consistent, I believe that this interpretation is fundamentally accurate. The central question of the present study can therefore be phrased very simply as: what is Eingedenken? My overall purpose is to examine and elucidate Benjamin's philosophy of memory - or, to be more specific, Benjamin's philosophy of remembrance and forgetting, for the two seemingly opposite mental functions are as closely intertwined in Benjamin's writing as anywhere in the contemporary philosophical literature. How does Eingedenken relate to other concepts of memory? Where to draw the main fault lines in the 20th century philosophy of memory and what is the nature of the conceptual shift envisioned by Benjamin? What, in other words, to

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5 With regard to references to Benjamin's texts, all citations - with the exception of those from Benjamin's correspondence - are to the *Gesammelte Schriften* edition (GS). German references to Benjamin's correspondence is to Briefe (Eds. G. Scholem and Th. Adorno, 1978). Whenever possible, English references are included in accordance with the following notation: *Illuminations* (Ill.), *Reflections* (Ref.), *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* (Corr.), *One Way Street and Other Writings* (GWS), *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (OGT), and *Selected Writings* (SW). Unless otherwise indicated, I cite the existing translations with tacit modifications where appropriate. Translated texts will throughout be referred to by their common English title, whereas texts that have not been published in translation (or have not been available to me in such a form) are listed under their original German title.
make of his claim to a Copernican turn in the relation between present and past? Is this motivated by a moral necessity, a concern about remembrance involving an element of unfaithfulness towards the past, or a general sense of modernity as a context of forgetting? What are the political implications of Benjamin's intervention in the philosophy of memory? To connect with the reflections about memory that I have sketched in the \textit{Preamble} to this study, one might also inquire what a concept of memory would be like that is capable of resisting a neutralization of the past. What are the social forces behind such a neutralization and wherein lies the need to confront the historical record precisely at those junctures where it is most difficult? We are forever told that we must remember so as not to repeat, but does remembrance itself entail a risk of retrospective legitimization of past wrongs, and is it in other ways vulnerable to an ideological manipulation of history? What, conversely, is at stake in actualizing the past?

It is in light of questions of this nature that I intend to address Benjamin in the present study. Being himself an early casualty of the war (as is well known, Benjamin took his own life in September 1940 during an attempt to escape occupied France), Benjamin's reflections on memory are developed in response to historical events and circumstances that are prior to the events recalled on the wall of our World War II bunker. And in terms of simple chronology, Benjamin predates - if only by a few years - the massive philosophical preoccupation with the recollection of political wrongs and social disaster that has become increasingly salient in the decades following 1945. But, read in retrospect, he comes down to us as one of most original and astute thinkers of precisely this complex of issues.
In gauging the relevant parts of Benjamin's authorship, one finds that memory and memory-related reflections are virtually ubiquitous in Benjamin's writings, notably in his late work which will form the central focus of the present study. The primary sources which will be examined or touched upon in the following can, for the purpose of forming a preliminary overview, be divided into three main groups. There are, first of all, a number of key texts that explicitly treat the question of memory. These are: *The Image of Proust* (1929), *Unpacking my Library* (1931), *A Berlin Chronicle* (1932), *Hashish in Marseilles* (1932), *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundret* (1932-34, 1938), *Franz Kafka* (1934), *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century* (1935), *The Storyteller* (1936), *Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire* (1938), *Zentralpark* (1939), *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (1939), *On the Concept of History* (1940), and *Das Passagenwerk* (1927-40). Secondly, and closely related to this, there are numerous studies that in our present perspective may be described as tangential yet integral to an understanding of Benjamin's philosophy of memory. By this I mean that they deal with topics that Benjamin associates closely with his notion of Eingedenken, yet they do not directly address the theme of memory and contain no explicit mention of Eingedenken. In this group could be mentioned most of Benjamin's other works of the late 1920s and 1930s, but notably: *One-Way Street* (1926), *Surrealism* (1929), *The Destructive Character* (1931), *On the Mimetic Faculty* (1933), *Doctrine of the Similar* (1933), *Erfahrung und Armut* (1933), and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935-36). A third cluster of relevant literature, finally,
comprises earlier works that either touch upon the topic of memory or strike important themes that carry over into Benjamin's subsequent thematization of memory. These are works that I do not treat as primary sources but which in various ways inform the parts of the authorship that form my primary focus of investigation. In this category may be mentioned, inter alia: "Experience" (1913), On the Program of the Coming Philosophy (1918), Every Unlimited Condition of the Will (1918), Theologico-Political Fragment (1921), Goethe's Elective Affinities (1922), and The Origin of German Tragic Drama (1925).

My reasons for concentrating primarily on Benjamin's "late work" - and thus by implication the question of epochalizing Benjamin's authorship - will be touched upon presently, but before turning to this, it is necessary to take stock of a peculiar feature of Benjamin's philosophy. This is its fragmentary nature and the episodic manner in which Benjamin broaches his main topics. Despite the central importance attributed to the theme of memory, Benjamin offers no substantial treatise on the topic. Like his key concepts generally, Eingedenken is always treated in passing in connection with studies and reflections on other themes or in commentaries on various literary authorships. Furthermore, only a small portion of what Benjamin writes about memory is presented in his own name. Most of his important insights are attributed to the authors on whom he is commenting or to a certain characteristic figure engaged in a memory-related activity -

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6 In his Story of a Friendship, composed almost 50 years later, Scholem recalls how during some weeks spent together in Paris in the autumn of 1927 Benjamin "said he needed texts of canonical importance in order to develop his philosophical ideas adequately to comment on them" (Scholem 1982:135).
such as, e.g., the figure of "the collector" or "the storyteller". Methodologically, Benjamin in this manner practices something akin to what has come to be known as a "nomadic" philosophy. Rather than build on foundations and seek to establish a fixed position, his thinking is characterized by restlessly constructing dynamic constellations of intellectual opposites and positioning himself strategically in relation to these. This makes for intriguing reading but also makes it notoriously difficult to isolate Benjamin's own voice and account for the respective status of his various works.

The fact that Benjamin's most important concepts are not systematically developed does not, however, imply that his thinking should be assumed to be incongruous and incoherent. Despite tensions and blanks in his intellectual position, it may be argued that his use of central philosophical concepts is generally consistent and what Peter Osborne, with reference to Wohlfarth, has called "systematically oriented" (Osborne 1994:61). A central purpose of the present study will be to substantiate this claim in relation to Benjamin's philosophy of memory, and specifically with respect to his use of the concept of Eingedenken. My aim is in other words to develop an integrated perspective on the various aspects of Benjamin's philosophy of memory. This has not been attempted before. There

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7 Compare Wohlfarth: "A Messianic perspective means for Benjamin, as it does not for Adorno, a constant shift of positions" (1986:8, n16).

8 According to Adorno he relegated the quest for an "unchanging, self-identical conceptual skeleton ... to the dustbin" (Adorno 1983:232).

9 Wohlfarth in turn attributes this point to Tiedemann, who is said to have "rightly insisted that even Benjamin's most ephemeral pieces have far-reaching, systematic implications" (Wohlfarth 1986:8, n18).
are numerous important works on memory in Benjamin, but none of these systematically survey the different aspects of Benjamin's writing on memory.

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In laying claim to a relatively coherent and well-elaborated philosophy of memory in Benjamin's fragmented authorship, I wish to emphasize that I am primarily referring to his work during the period from about 1925 to his death in 1940, i.e. to the part of the authorship that follows his Habilitationsschrift The Origin of the German Tragic Drama (Trauerspiel), which was completed in 1925, rejected by the German academy the same year, and published in 1928. This part of the authorship, which according to a widespread convention may be called Benjamin's late period (Spätwerk), is characterized by a number of significant developments which profoundly affect his approach to the topic of memory. One has to do with Benjamin's manner of philosophizing, i.e. the characteristic essayistic style that he developed after 1928 in response to the demands of piecing together a living

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11 Others divide the authorship such that the years in question span a combination of Benjamin's "middle" and "late" period. John McCole, e.g., speaks of the period form 1926 - 35 (McCole 1993:18), respectively 1925 - 33 (ibid.:33) as Benjamin's "middle years." Wohlfarth, however, follows Tiedemann in treating Benjamin's intellectual production between 1927 and 1940 as a generally unified context (Wohlfarth 1986:5).
from isolated journal contributions and radio talks, etc. According to Adorno this "greatly
developed the agility of his profound mind" (Adorno 1983:232) and led him to develop "a
philosophy against philosophy" (ibid.:235). In terms of intellectual orientation, two
developments stand out in particular. The first is marked by his turn towards Marxism, and
in a broader sense the politicization of his thought. This has several sources, both personal
and historical. In 1924 he met and fell in love with the Latvian revolutionary Asja Lacis and
through her became acquainted with Brecht, with whom he maintained a close relationship
throughout their years in exile. At the same time the rise of fascism presented an objective
demand for political mobilization. During the second half of the 1920s, Benjamin
contemplated the possibility of making joint cause with the communist party but was never
able to bring himself to do this. His posthumously published Moscow Diary bears vivid
testimony to this struggle. But, as is carefully documented in Scholem's personal
recollections, Benjamin also seriously contemplated taking up Hebrew studies in Jerusalem
during this period (Scholem 1982:135ff.), and it may be argued that the tension between
these two poles of intellectual attraction remains intact throughout his later years in the
form of his (in)famous dual commitment to materialism and theology. In terms of forming
an understanding of Marxist theory, Benjamin's main source of inspiration (aside from
Brecht in the later years) came from reading Lukacs' History and Class-Consciousness -
published in 1923 and picked up by Benjamin in 1924. This is important, because it very
early on introduced Benjamin to the essential Hegelian Marx reading which came to
profoundly shape Western Marxism and which I shall argue forms an important foil for his
own subsequent attempts to rethink the theory of historical materialism.
A second, no less important, shift in Benjamin's position is marked by an explicit and sustained orientation towards the analysis of modernity. This comes to expression in his studies of material culture, in most of his literary studies, and in his intense preoccupation with aesthetic modernism. The encounter with Surrealism during roughly the same period as his turn towards Marxism had a lasting effect on virtually all aspects of his subsequent authorship. He came to share the Surrealists' preoccupation with other levels of reality than that immediately accessible to our waking consciousness, i.e. notably myth and dream, and in extension of this developed the notion of "phantasmagoria" as one of his primary targets of intervention. Moreover, he absorbed from Surrealism a deep fascination with the metropolis, notably Paris. Albeit cautious and at times outright critical of the escapist tendencies of the Surrealist movement, Benjamin's choice to align himself with its underlying agenda (at least to much greater extent than most intellectuals on the Marxist left) is indicative of an unyielding commitment to aesthetic modernism. Ultimately he saw this as a forum within which to radically thematize the concept of freedom and, as he puts it, "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution."

In many ways bringing together these divergent foci of Benjamin's late work is his original conception of and the first drafts for the famous Passagenwerk - the unfinished study of the Paris arcades, and in a wider sense of the "Urgeschichte" (primal history) of the nineteenth century.\(^\text{12}\) This project was to provide the overall framework for the great

\(^{12}\) The title "Passagenwerk" used by Tiedemann in Gesammelte Schriften for Benjamin's unfinished project on Paris of the nineteenth century is controversial. Wohlfarth, among others, strongly criticizes it on the ground that the project was too far from completion to be designated a "work." Moreover, it may not have been possible to actually complete due to what Wohlfarth identifies as an in-built messianic structure. In this
majority of the author's subsequent intellectual pursuits until his death in 1940. As has now been solidly established in the literature, the Arcades Project retains core elements of the Trauerspiel study (such as the melancholy perspective, the preoccupation with allegory and the ruins of history, tracing the "origins" of twentieth century modernity, the redemption of phenomena, the construction of significant constellations of past and present, etc.), but at the same time it also channels Benjamin's Surrealism-inspired fascination with urban modernity and determination to connect with "subaltern" levels of reality. And it becomes a focal point for his Marxist commitments, as is evident both in the theory of history developed in Konvolut N and in the underlying aim of the project to facilitate an awakening "from the nightmare of the nineteenth century" - as Benjamin designates the epoch of high capitalism. The Passagenwerk was initially conceived as a relatively short essay, but it expanded dramatically throughout the 1930s as Benjamin amassed material on all aspects of the metropolis to the point of uncertainty as to whether it could ever be assembled into a coherent presentation. It is striking that despite the seemingly marginal nature of the topic, the project was surrounded by tremendous expectations, to some extent on Benjamin's own part, but even more so by his close acquaintances who counted several

light, Wohlfarth and other commentators recommend Benjamin's own preferred designation, namely the "Passagenarbeit" - and to avoid confusion altogether, reference is widely made to the "Arcades Project" (Wohlfarth 1986:4ff.). In the following I shall use all three designations interchangeably.

13 According to Schoelmer some studies (notably the Kafka and Leskov studies) express a competing orientation towards Jewish thinking. Wolin follows him in this interpretation (see e.g. Wolin 1994:224f.), but in my view it introduces too much of an internal divisor into Benjamin's late work, since it obscures the manner in which antithetical positions are brought into a productive tension with one another.

of the leading intellectual figures of the age. It is thus telling that Adorno saw the project virtually as a test of the state of twentieth century philosophy and recommended that Benjamin keep this part of his work separate from the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, lest its editors (including Adorno himself!) should exert a restrictive or censoring influence (cf. Buck-Morss 1989:216f.).

This general constellation of Marxism (in a highly idiosyncratic version), aesthetic modernism, and (gestures towards) a sociology of modernity forms the overall context for the articulation of Benjamin’s philosophy of memory as it will be expounded in the present study. Hence my intention to focus primarily on the works succeeding the Trauerspiel study. This loosely imposed cut-off point must not, needless to say, be taken to preclude that there are also important continuities in Benjamin’s overall intellectual development, even reaching as far back as to his student years and to his writings in the context of the pre-World War I German Youth Movement. Recent Benjamin scholarship has done much to clarify the inner connectedness of the seemingly disparate phases of Benjamin’s authorship and I shall in the same spirit draw in references to early works whenever these seem relevant. But the important point is that I do this ad hoc without engaging in a discussion of the overall question of continuity and rupture in Benjamin’s authorship. I believe that this question is not of primary significance to an understanding of Benjamin’s philosophy of memory, and besides, it is better addressed in the context of intellectual biographies of Benjamin, of which there are now several excellent examples.15

A further consideration corroborating the emphasis being placed on Benjamin's late work in the present context is the simple observation that the late 1920s mark the point in time when Benjamin began to develop an express interest in the topic of memory. Thus, in addition to the aforementioned developments in his intellectual orientation during this period, a further important development - which may not be of the same order of significance, but which is nevertheless decisive for the angle from which I propose to approach Benjamin - is attributable to his encounter with Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Benjamin recognized this novel as one of the most significant literary achievements of his age, and in addition to co-translating three books of the novel into German (together with Franz Hessel, beginning in 1925) he adopted several Proustian themes and motifs as his own. Central among these is the theme of memory. It appears that the notion of Eingedenken is first consistently employed by Benjamin in his 1929 essay *The Image of Proust*. It here functions as the equivalent of "mémoire involontaire," and in

16 In *Tactics of Remembrance: Proust, Surrealism, and the Origin of the Passagenwerk*, Pensky forcefully links Benjamin's preoccupation with memory, as articulated in the twin 1929 studies on Surrealism and Proust and as carrying over into the *Arcades Project*, with the *Trauerspiel* study. The decisive link is the figure of the *brooder* (Grübler) - "the preeminent melancholy subject" - whose "tormented sense of occluded significance indwelling in apparently the most insignificant things is a special form of memory" (1996:170). Pensky proceeds to cite a *Passagenwerk* entry reinforcing this nexus: "The case of the brooder is that of the man who once had the solution to the Great Problem, but then forgot it. And now he broods, not so much over the matter as over his past brooding about it. The thought of the brooder thus stands under the sign of memory [Erinnerung]" (GS V:465). Interestingly, however, one finds little or no explicit attention to the theme of memory in the *Trauerspiel* study, and no use of the noun Eingedenken.

17 One would expect that it might already figure as a technical term in the Proust translation, but a perusal of the three books translated by Benjamin and Hessel reveal that this is not the case. A simple reason for this may be that none of the volumes translated contain abstract reflections on memory. The *Overture and Time Regained*, which are the
order to preserve the structure of Proust's phrase and convey the involuntary quality of this form of memory the noun is usually qualified by an adjective, either "unwillkürliche" or "ungewollte." However, already in the Proust commentary the adjective is sometimes dropped and in the course of the 1930s "Eingedenken" tends to be employed without further qualification. If my interpretation is correct, this signals that the conceptualization of this form of memory has become a central theme in its own right.

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Returning now to the question of the inner coherence of Benjamin's late work, it is my claim that the concept of Eingedenken is connected in numerous and complicated ways with all of the other main themes outlined above. In order to bring this out, I propose in a very preliminary manner to indicate some of the defining features of Eingedenken. One characteristic feature of Eingedenken is that it is a mode of memory that is defined by a two parts of Proust's opus directly addressing the nature of the "mémoire involontaire" and where the need for an accurate technical terminology would have become most pressing, were not translated by Benjamin and Hessel.

Both adjectives imply that the concept of memory in question is "involuntary" or "unwilled," but both add certain additional connotations to the concept, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

It must be emphasized that this terminology usage only applies when it comes to memory words denoting the faculty of memory as such, i.e. the general mental capacity to remember. When it comes to the object of that faculty, i.e. a specific memory or many memories, Benjamin offers no direct equivalent to Eingedenken. As a general rule, he simply uses the generic term "Erinnerungen," but in places where it is significant to mark that we are dealing with a very specific type of memories, he sometimes qualifies these too by the adjective "unwillkürliche," thus arriving at the phrase "unwillkürliche Erinnerungen" which refers us back full circle to the faculty of Eingedenken.
radical orientation towards the past and yet a commitment to activate the present. It is based on a principle of what Habermas has called anamnestic solidarity with the casualties of past wrongs, Benjamin's central premise being that the act of honoring a radical obligation towards past generations at the same time serves as a means of interrupting the on-going neutralization of subversive energies in the present. Thus Eingedenken is eminently an actualizing (as opposed to neutralizing) form of memory - to employ the conceptual language outlined in the Preamble to this study. Viewed in a broad perspective, the conceptualization of memory forms part of Benjamin's general endeavour to rethink the fundamental premises of the philosophy of history, including the very notion of temporality. In the course of the 1930s, and notably in response to the rise of fascism, this increasingly takes on a political significance to Benjamin, which is to say that his preoccupation with memory and history is closely linked with a commitment to rethink political strategies as well as the basic nature of practice. The politics of the past marks, by the same token, an important site of negotiating the characteristic tension in Benjamin's political thinking between a materialist and a theological orientation, the latter being particularly pronounced in the concept of Eingedenken which, precisely by virtue of its intense politicization, is invested with a redemptive function and is at one point identified as "a weak messianic power" (GS I:694, Ill.:254).

Viewed from a different angle, the conceptualization of Eingedenken is to Benjamin intimately related to a rethinking of the structure of experience. A central theme of his sociology of modernity is the prevalence of a certain "atrophy of experience," which is analyzed (loosely) in Freudian terms as the consequence of a constant imposition of shock
factors in all spheres of life. A central challenge to Benjamin's philosophy of memory, accordingly, is to conceptualize a mode of memory that can connect with the experience of shock. This means restoring a certain cohesion between the two moments of experience that in German are designated respectively Erlebnis and Erfahrung. Yet in pursuing such an agenda, Benjamin comes to position himself in uncomfortable proximity to various politically regressive strategies of compensating for the dissatisfactions of modernity. In this manner, the conceptualization of Eingedenken involves negotiating a complex dialectic of loss and liberation. Like the conceptual innovations at the level of historiography, this too is fundamentally about rethinking viable political strategies, and in a wider sense about rethinking subjectivity and practice. In so far as Eingedenken is initially modeled on the Proustian mémoire involontaire, there is something inherently paradoxical about seeking to constitute it as a practice, yet this is precisely what Benjamin does, thus in effect dismantling or destabilizing the underlying opposition between voluntary and involuntary.

A third, closely related aspect of Benjamin's conceptualization of Eingedenken is that it bespeaks a deep-seated interest in material culture. This theme, too, is consistent with the Proustian influence but takes on unique characteristics in Benjamin's rendition. An intense preoccupation with the life of objects, with cityscapes and things, outmoded commodities, the practice of collecting, etc., is, as has already been noted, a central theme of the Arcades Project - Benjamin unfinished "prehistory" of the nineteenth century. The defining characteristic of Eingedenken in this connection is to treat material objects as triggers of a memory which allows us to connect with a submerged, otherwise inaccessible past and which, by the very fact of restoring its unique qualities, serves to "liberate" the
object “from the drudgery of being useful” (GS V:53; Refl.:155). This dual strategy is
described by Habermas as a strategy of rescuing semantic energies in the past. Benjamin
conceives it as an intervention against commodification and reification - an intervention
which at the same time prefigures a utopian concept of wealth and thereby of the relations
(both inter-subjective and to nature) of a redeemed humanity. The excess of experience
stored up in the material object, so to speak, constitutes Eingedenken as a powerful force in
the public realm and renders it capable of exploding bourgeois interiority, which as a
strategy of consolidating subjectivity through a culture of things is the flip side of
Benjamin’s anamnestic intervention.

In all of these respects it is my central claim that Eingedenken is implicitly
articulated as a conceptual antithesis to Hegel’s concept of Erinnerung. Indeed, this is one
way of substantiating Benjamin’s claim to a Copernican revolution in the philosophy of
memory. The concept of Erinnerung expounded in the Phenomenology of Spirit is directed
at virtually the same philosophical territory as Benjamin’s concept of Eingedenken but is
based on certain fundamentally different premises, and even if these premises are nowhere
explicitly addressed by Benjamin, I shall argue that they serve as a foil for much of his
writing on the topics of history and memory, politics and practice. This becomes especially
apparent in Benjamin commentaries struggling to come to terms with the author’s
idiosyncratic philosophy of history and concept of revolutionary practice in comparison
with a more familiar body of Marxist theory based on a Hegelian model of dialectical
mediation. What is ultimately at stake is a rethinking of dialectics, i.e. of how to construe
oppositions. The underlying thrust of Benjamin’s “dialectics at a standstill” is not to resolve
oppositions but rather to keep them taut and to allow critical thinking to unfold in the heightened fields of intellectual tension that thereby arise. Objective oppositions crystalize in what Benjamin (introducing another deliberately paradoxical concept) styles the "dialectical image," and our investigation will reveal that precisely this emerges as the object of Eingedenken. As an implicit critique of Hegelian Erinnerung, Benjamin's reflections on the dialectics of remembrance and forgetting in the context of modernity is about mobilizing the force of the dialectical image in the political realm, and in so doing about conceiving an alternative to the strategy of ideology critique - the essential Hegelian mode of intervention taken up by Western Marxist thinking. Expressed in terms of theological idiom - which, incidentally, is a mode of thinking that Hegel and Benjamin broach with equal ease albeit in accordance with radically different models of theology - the decisive difference between Erinnerung and Eingedenken is that whereas the former persistently pushes towards forgiveness and reconciliation (of conflicting factions in the present and of the present with history), the latter staunchly refuses this impulse.

The investment of the concept of Eingedenken with these multiple dimensions makes for a highly diverse pattern in Benjamin's writing on memory. For even if they are all attributed to the same concept, they spring from different sources which do not integrate harmoniously with one another but rather mark contrasting poles in a complex field of intellectual tension. The upshot of this, I argue, is that the concept of Eingedenken cannot be defined in terms of a single characteristic feature but rather needs to be developed as a composite concept. It gains its definition though the interplay of various dichotomized oppositions - e.g., an ecstatic and a sobering aspect, a flow and its interruption, an interplay
of attentiveness and distraction - and only by exposing the inner dialectical structure of
these is it possible to attain an integrated perspective on Benjamin’s writings on memory.
My exposition of the concept of Eingedenken will accordingly be divided into three stages.
Key to the development of these stages is that their inner dynamic needs to be understood
in accordance with Benjamin’s own notion of “dialectics at a standstill” - a dialectics where
the contrasting moments are not continually mediated and resolved but rather “flash
together” in points of heightened tension. This is not an easy challenge to meet, for the very
ambition of systematizing and integrating the different dimensions of Benjamin’s concept
of memory involves a natural tendency to resolve inner tensions and thus in effect develop
the concepts in a Hegelian fashion.20

The three moments of Eingedenken that I treat in succession are, firstly, a moment
of remembrance as ecstatic experience, which is closely linked with a Proust-inspired
determination of Eingedenken as involuntary memory; secondly, a moment of constituting
Eingedenken as a practice which, given its involuntary nature, marks a deliberately
paradoxical strategy; and thirdly, a moment of seeking to mobilize the force of
Eingedenken in the public / political realm. The culminating moment Benjamin often
identifies as a moment of awakening, thereby unmistakably alluding to the enlightenment

20 At the opening of On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last
Reflections, Wohlfarth confronts a similar dilemma. He observes that since the publication
of the accompanying notes and fragments for On the Concept of History, it has become
possible “to piece together Benjamin’s version of the messianic triad.” In setting about to
do this he is well aware that “To reassemble its elements into such a structure is no doubt to
risk oversystematizing Benjamin’s fragmentary and disparate corpus.” Yet this thrust is
difficult to escape (perhaps even for Benjamin himself), for as Wohlfarth wryly remarks:
“fragmentariness and reunification belong precisely to the periodicity of the triadic scheme”
(Wohlfarth 1978:148f.).
strategies of critique which his philosophy of memory continually probes yet surreptitiously subverts. Invoking a different register of connotations, namely that of theology, I suggest that the final moment of the concept of Eingedenken may also be characterized as apocalyptic. Etymologically the apocalypse indicates an uncovering and thus resurfacing of a forgotten past. In this respect it is a moment of judgement, but the notion also invariably carries the connotation of a transition to a new socio-temporal order and is thus prefigured as a moment of redemption. I shall seek to demonstrate that Benjamin brings both of these associations into play, yet he does it without ever positively identifying the eschatological / utopian categories that theology places at his disposal. The operative mode of his philosophy of memory is rather to infuse politics with a radically negative theology - a theology relentlessly oriented towards a horizon of judgement and redemption without ever identifying a positive position from which this could be accomplished. In pointed contrast to the Hegelian Erinnerung, which is conceived precisely as a vehicle of reconciliation, Eingedenken thus emerges as a form of remembrance refusing reconciliation.

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In terms of its overall structure, my study is divided into two main parts, the first part consisting of three chapters developing the context of Benjamin's philosophy of memory and the second part consisting of three chapters developing the concept of Eingedenken. The contextualizing chapters (Chapters 1 - 3) examine, firstly, the general parameters of Benjamin's politics of the past; secondly, the Hegelian backdrop to
Benjamin’s philosophy of memory; and thirdly, Benjamin’s analysis of experience in the context of modernity, what I call his “phenomenology of modernity.” The three chapters on the concept of Eingedenken (Chapters 4 - 6) follow the logic outlined above. Finally, the study is concluded with an epilogue titled Beyond Exegesis. This presents, on the one hand, a summary of the manner in which Benjamin envisions Eingedenken as a political practice and, on the other hand, a review of selected critical assessments in the current scholarly literature of Benjamin’s current topicality - what in German would be styled his “Aktualität.”

Thus to recapitulate: Chapter I is devoted to establishing the main parameters of Benjamin’s politicization of the past, notably as outlined in On the Concept of History and the corresponding sections of the Passagenwerk. It takes its point of departure in Benjamin’s key distinction between historicism and historical materialism and examines the manner in which these positions are interpreted respectively as neutralizing and activating forces in the present. This analysis is followed by a review of two critical (in certain respects “classical”) Benjamin receptions by respectively Rolf Tiedemann and Jürgen Habermas. Given an identification of a close structural similarity between these two otherwise widely different Benjamin critiques, I argue that both are based on a set of common Hegelian presuppositions which need to be identified in their own right as the key counter-position to Benjamin’s intervention in the philosophy of history. At the end of the chapter, I discuss different aspects of the relation between history and memory in Benjamin’s thinking and conclude by observing that the underlying opposition to a Hegelian paradigm applies not only at the level of historiography but at the level of
memory as well.

Chapter 2 is devoted to an examination of the concept of Erinnerung in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Following an exegesis of the passages in which Hegel explicitly addresses the concept, I turn to the question of how Hegel, in accordance with the concept of Erinnerung itself, extends his analysis of remembrance into the realm of practical spirit. This is done, initially, by a reconstruction of the concept of Bildung and in this connection of the interplay between Erinnerung and Erfahrung as operative within the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In the final part of the chapter I attempt a broad sketch of how Hegelian Erinnerung is envisioned as an activating force liberating human potentiality through a comprehensive mediation between subjective and objective spirit, individual and society. Given the basic conceptual opposition outlined in the previous chapter between historicism and “historical materialism,” Hegel’s philosophy of memory quite clearly belongs in the former category (in fact constitutes one of its defining examples), yet what emerges from my reconstruction of the notion of Erinnerung is that it is a remarkably rich concept of memory. This presents Benjamin’s own thematization of Eingedenken with a strong point of conceptual opposition, as is the basic intention of the second chapter.

Chapter 3 is about Benjamin’s *phenomenology of modernity*. The key texts of relevance to this theme are the Baudelaire studies, *The Storyteller, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the Kafka studies, and various short essays such as *Erfahrung und Armut* (“Poverty and Experience”) and *The Destructive Character*. I begin the chapter with an close examination of Benjamin’s notion of an *atrophy of experience* indicating a schism between Erlebnis and Erfahrung. In extension of this, I turn to
Benjamin’s appropriation of the Freudian analysis of shock and the manner in which he suggests that this affects the contemporary structure of experience. The latter is found to reveal a pattern of experiential bipolarity, which in turn sets the stage for a dual structure of memory (as both conscious and unconscious, voluntary and involuntary, shallow and deep, etc.) that proves to be integral to Benjamin’s conceptualization of Eingedenken. In view of my overall approach to the topic, it will be observed that these aspects of Benjamin’s phenomenology of modernity may be read as an implicit critique of the viability of Hegelian Erinnerung and the notion of Bildung associated with it. In two final sections of the chapter I discuss, firstly, Benjamin’s (surprisingly affirmative) strategic response to the experience of impoverishment and, secondly, certain characteristic patterns of remembrance and forgetting that are most clearly developed in the Kafka studies. By zooming in on the topic of memory in the context of modernity, Benjamin’s Kafka reading provides a nice transition to an explicit thematization of the concept of Eingedenken in the remaining three chapters.

Beginning in Chapter 4, I turn to an examination of the concept of Eingedenken itself. Key textual sources are The Image of Proust, parts of the Passagenwerk, Surrealism, Unpacking my Library, the various city studies, the two volumes containing Benjamin’s own Berlin childhood memories, and again aspects of the Baudelaire studies and the historico-philosophical theses. Like Benjamin himself, I take my point of departure in the Proustian notion of mémoire involontaire and discuss the manner in which Eingedenken is modeled on this as well as the strong tension that Benjamin maintains throughout his authorship in relation to Proust. An important implication of identifying Eingedenken as a
form of involuntary memory, in my analysis, is that the concept is from the outset attributed an ecstatic quality. This is elaborated both with reference to Proust and in relation to various broader strands of Benjamin’s late authorship. In extension of this, the nature of involuntary memory is further elaborated through a specification of its contrast to voluntary memory, through a discussion of the motives underlying Benjamin’s and Proust’s reconceptualization of memory, and through an identification of the characteristic object of involuntary memory, which is found to be closely related to the notion of experience in a state of shock. These initial determinations of the concept of Eingedenken all prove to be associated with a state of decentred subjectivity, which I argue is nowhere prior to Benjamin (following Proust and to a certain extent Freud) firmly established as a basis for the thematization of memory. In conclusion of the chapter Benjamin’s own critique of the ecstatic moment is summarized, thus preparing the dialectical transition to the second moment of the concept of Eingedenken.

The leitmotif of Chapter 5 is the various ways in which Benjamin configures Eingedenken as a practice and thus sets the stage for an examination of its political implications. In pursuing various strategies aimed at seizing of the involuntary, Benjamin in effect dismantles the opposition between voluntary and involuntary and in a wider sense marks his subversive strategies as inherently paradoxical. The three main ways in which he envisions seizing involuntary memory as a practice consist, firstly, in engaging in a practice of self-preparation, thus rendering the self receptive to the advent of involuntary memory; secondly, in cultivating an ability to exercise the mimetic faculty and detect “correspondences” (a mental operation that is identified as integral to the experience of
involuntary memory); and thirdly, in exploring the rich interface of memory and material culture and thereby intervening critically in the social order of things.

As these various configurations of Eingedenken as practice supplement the ecstatic dimension of the concept with a "sobering" aspect, so Chapter 6 off-sets the theme of involuntary memory as a cognitive flow by focusing on the moment of interruption. In extension of a discussion of how Benjamin envisions the practice of Eingedenken as the instrument of an "awakening," the culminating moment of the concept is identified as the seizing of an image, and more specifically a "dialectical image," from the flow of involuntary memory. The practical implications of this are investigated in existential terms, and in this light the question is raised as to whether a similar dynamic can be transposed to the political realm, i.e. whether a notion of memory that is derived at the level of individual subjectivity can be transposed to the collective level. Herein lies the decisive challenge to Benjamin's philosophy of memory. It is a challenge of breaking the interiority of remembrance - taken to an extreme by both Hegel and Proust - which marks a defining feature of bourgeois subjectivity. In pursuing this as a cross-cutting theme in all of his writings on memory, we shall find that Benjamin presents a range of approaches to configuring Eingedenken as exoteric and thus as a powerful force in the political realm. But certain grey zones remain in his politics of memory, especially when it comes to the transposition of redemptive remembrance from the individual to the level of collective subjectivity. I argue that this, ultimately, may mark a decisive stumbling block to Benjamin's anamnestic intervention in the politics of the past; yet if so, it is a "shortcoming" which is objectively founded and which therefore confronts us with the
fundamental difficulties involved in articulating a viable concept of historical change.

In so far as Benjamin's discussion of the political impact of Eingedenken is premised on attributing a redemptive function to this form of remembrance, a central analytical challenge at the final stage of exposition consists in once again reviewing the author's use of theological motifs and in a broader sense the confluence of theology and historical materialism which is the hallmark of his political thinking. In this spirit I conclude the chapter with an examination of what I call the apocalyptic dimension of Benjamin's philosophy of memory - the notion of the apocalypse being attributed a dual sense of connotations as both an uncovering of a submerged past and a transition to a new socio-temporal order. Even if incapable of positively qualifying the course of such a transition, Benjamin maintains an uncompromising commitment to it through the strategic, materialistically-oriented deployment of a negative theology. Thus, if the integrative force operative at every level of Hegel's positive dialectic is identifiable as a conciliatory remembrance, then Benjamin's dialectic at a standstill gains its illuminating, disruptive impact through an equally persistent commitment to Eingedenken as unforgiving memory.
Chapter 1

Politicizing the Past

In his posthumously published theses On the Concept of History, Benjamin constitutes the past as a site of struggle. This is a familiar theme in twentieth century Marxist historiography, but in Benjamin’s last completed text, it is radicalized virtually beyond recognition. Not only is our awareness of the past seen as a live force in the

21 This text is also commonly known as the Theses on the Philosophy of History, which is the title used in the standard English translation (III.:253ff.) and in much English language Benjamin scholarship. In German, this usage can be traced back to in a 1955 edition of Benjamin’s Schriften where the text is listed under the title “Geschichts-philosophische Thesen.” The only title used by Benjamin himself, however, is Über den Begriff der Geschichte (GS 1:1259). This title may perhaps have been provisional, since the text was not intended for immediate publication, and it may be argued that it is somewhat misleading on the grounds that Benjamin tends to think in terms of images rather than conceptual elucidation (cf. Tiedemann 1983:72f.). But in keeping with what appears to be an emerging new convention, I nevertheless find it most correct to stick with Benjamin’s own title and only make a concession to common English usage by sometimes referring to the text simply as Benjamin’s theses.

22 In fact, Benjamin deliberately articulates his position in opposition to Marx’ famous injunction in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte to “let the dead bury their dead” (cf. Tiedemann 1983-84:79). This dictum in many ways epitomizes a historiography of progress, a deliberate disregard or neutralization of the past for the sake of pursuing a better future, which Benjamin associates with the position of “historicism” and in opposition to which he articulates his own “materialist” historiography. As an important point of departure for the complex of issues addressed in this chapter, the relevant passage
present which needs to be approached with political acumen; rather, the past is itself viewed as open to a retroactive intervention and is thus in a certain sense construed as contemporary with the present. "[E]ven the dead," Benjamin warns, "will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (GS I:695, Ill.:255, thesis 6). To resist this threat, Benjamin seeks to mobilize "a retroactive force" which "will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers" (GS I:694, Ill.:255, thesis 4).

Closely related to the view of the past as a site of struggle, Benjamin also configures history as a site of incompleteness and uncertainty. Far from being inscribed a logic of historical necessity and irresistible teleological development, the outcome of the political struggle to which history is subject remains undecided. In this respect, Benjamin presents a radically secular concept of history bespeaking a world void of providence (but not for that reason indifferent to theology). This raises the stakes of historiographical intervention. Everything is on the line and nothing is certain: "The good tidings which the historian of the past brings with throbbing heart may be lost in a void the very moment he opens his mouth" (GS I:695, Ill.:255, thesis 5).

A third key feature of Benjamin’s manner of politicizing history is that the “fight for

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deserves to be cited in full. Marx’ 1852 text reads: “The social revolution of the 19th century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition with regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves against their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the 19th century must let the dead bury their dead. Then the words went beyond the content; now the content goes beyond the words” (Marx 1978 [1852]:13).

the oppressed past" (GS I:703, 263, thesis 17) is attributed a direct impact on the politics of
the historian’s own present. Here, too, the stakes are high. At the historical moment when
Benjamin completed his theses (the early months of 1940), Europe was embroiled in a
war which was on the eve of turning into a world war. The struggle against Fascism had
been betrayed even by the Communist International with Stalin’s non-aggression pact with
Hitler in August 1939. And the author himself, after seven years of exile from Nazi
Germany, was about to embark on the attempt to escape occupied France which was to cost
him his life. At this historical moment, Benjamin’s long-standing concern about the legacy
of European civilization had come to a point (GS IV:122), and his effort in On the Concept
of History to reconceptualize history and define a viable revolutionary stance corresponds
to what he had elsewhere described as “the grasping of the emergency brake by the human
race traveling in the train of world history” (GS I:1232).

Stated in general terms, the central motif of On the Concept of History is the link
between historiography and politics. In Benjamin’s thinking this link constitutes a
fundamental premise of the philosophy of history and can be articulated both in the positive
and in the negative. As indicated above, it can be elaborated in terms of a connection
between a radicalized orientation towards the past and the possibility of a radical
intervention in the politics of the present. But it can also be elaborated in terms of a

24 It should be noted that Benjamin’s composition of the Thesis had been underway
for several years (cf. GS I:1223ff.), and the articulation of his take on the philosophy of
history in some respects reaches all the way back to his earliest writings. See, e.g., On the
Programme of the Coming Philosophy (1918), Types of History (1918), World and Time
(1919-20), The Philosophy of History of the Late Romantics and the Historical School
(1921), The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe (1921) - all contained in translation in
Selected Writings (Benjamin 1996).
historiography which neutralizes oppositional political forces in the present, and which is thus powerless in the face of - if not actually party to - the historical calamity sweeping Europe during the 1930s. Benjamin’s 1940 text is largely devoted to clarifying the opposition between these two types of historiography. The position that he seeks to mobilize in the fight against Fascism he calls “historical materialism,” and the neutralizing concept of history in opposition to which he articulates himself is referred to as historicism.25

As a matrix of two fundamentally different ways of politicizing the past, the opposition between historicism and historical materialism is also applicable to Benjamin’s philosophy of memory. A central focus of this study will therefore be to distinguish between historicist forms of memory and a concept of memory that is aligned with the position of historical materialism. The latter, indeed, is what the conceptualization of Eingedenken is about. But it must be noted from the outset that the relationship between memory and historiography in Benjamin’s writing is a complicated one. Far from being conceived simply as two analogous but separate spheres of cognition, they mutually implicate one another at several critical junctures. Thus the materialist historiographical project engages memory as a means of forging access to a forgotten past, and the corresponding conceptualization of memory, conversely, involves a transition from the

25 The allusion to Nietzsche’s second Untimely Meditation that is contained in this choice of terminology is deliberate on Benjamin’s part. He cites On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life in the caption to thesis 12 and in this way accentuates the contrast between activating and neutralizing historiography. For a more general discussion of Benjamin’s relation to Nietzsche, see, e.g., Comay 1990, Wohlfarth 1986:15ff., McCole 1993: 51ff. et passim.
individual back to the collective level which directly implicates it in the struggle over history.

The interplay between memory and history will form a subject of investigation throughout the study. As a point of departure, I shall concentrate on developing the basic opposition between historicism and historical materialism as outlined in On the Concept of History. Following this, I review two key interpretations of Benjamin's heterodox concept of historical materialism and the concomitant concept of a radicalized political practice that he claims to attain by "enlisting" theology in the service of materialist theory. The respective authors are Rolf Tiedemann and Jürgen Habermas; both are in the end strongly critical of Benjamin's project (albeit for quite different reasons), but in developing this critique, they bring out central points of tension in his work. In a joint assessment of the two critical receptions, I seek to demonstrate that both authors in effect measure Benjamin's version of historical materialism against the standard of a Hegelian philosophy of history. This, I argue, points to an implicit "Auseinandersetzung" with Hegel in much of Benjamin's work. Although Benjamin rarely addresses Hegel openly and never systematically, a central aim of my study is to demonstrate that his fragmentary philosophy of memory and history reads as a sustained attempt to rethink many of the key tenets of the latter. At the end of this chapter, I return to the question concerning the relationship between history and memory, my central argument being that the objections encountered to the political viability of Benjamin's radicalized concept of practice can only be properly addressed when taken up at the level of the philosophy of memory. This means that it is opportune to transpose the implicit opposition to Hegel, as brought out by both Habermas
and Tiedemann, to the philosophy of memory as well. A central focus of my study as a whole will therefore be to elaborate Benjamin's concept of Eingedenken in comparison with Hegel's concept of Erinnerung, and to lay the ground for this I subject the latter concept to separate examination in Chapter 2.

**Historicism and “historical materialism”**

Historicism gives the “eternal” image of the past: historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called “Once upon a time” in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history. (*On the Concept of History*, thesis 16)

As is evident by the unapologetically sexist imagery employed in the passage from *On the Concept of History* cited above, Benjamin depicts the opposition between historicism and historical materialism as one between an easily available but infertile and draining encounter with the past and a unique experience of the past that is fertile, empowering, and eminently expressive of male potency. Upon examination, however, images such as this are only partially illuminating - and sometimes partially misleading. Both “historicism” and “historical materialism” mark complex positions which, in spite of Benjamin’s proclivity towards imagistic thinking, need to be carefully developed in conceptual terms. In the following we shall examine each position in turn.
Historicism

In the Theses and elsewhere in Benjamin's writing, the concept of historicism carries several different meanings and is associated with divergent, if not outright conflicting positions in the philosophy of history. Thus it stands in need of clarification: what exactly does historicism mean? On the basis of On the Concept of History, it is possible to specify two primary aspects of the notion of historicism which, upon examination, will be seen to more closely related than initially apparent. These are history as science and history as ideology.

The trope of history as science is brought out most clearly by Benjamin in connection with his reflections on historiographical methodology. Given the aim, which Benjamin associates with Leopold von Ranke, of reconstructing the past "the way it really was" (GS I:695, Ill.:255, thesis 6), the principal historicist approach to the past is to "blot out everything [one] know[s] about the later course of history" (GS I:696, Ill.:256, thesis 7). John McCole refers to this as an attitude of "past-mindedness" (McCole 1993:247f.). It is attained by defining a particular epoch of the past as one's centre of gravity and positioning oneself hypothetically in this epoch. One can then through a method of empathy (Einfühlung) seek "to relive an era" (GS I:696, Ill.:256, thesis 7) and thereby depict it in its own right. In this manner subjective biases and concerns pertaining to the historian's own era are ostensibly kept out of the picture and the past becomes an object of disinterested contemplation. Viewed in this light, the designation "historicism" indicates that history is canonized as its own standard of reference.

The trope of history as ideology, on the other hand, comes into the foreground in
connection with the need to grasp the nature and logic of *diachronicity*, i.e. with assumptions about the *continuity* between different historical epochs. Historicism, according to Benjamin, posits continuity by "telling the sequence of events like the beads on a rosary" (GS I:704, Ill.:263, thesis A) and by "establishing a causal connection between various moments in history" (ibid.). In this manner, long sequences of the past are integrated into a *universal history*. Like the more static sense of historicism outlined above, this approach to historiography is also *scientistic* - this time in the sense of positing relations of causality, stipulating that one historical event leads to another with necessity, and thereby also stipulating that history is subject to laws that are analogous to the laws of nature. Such assumptions are easily subordinated to a set of more explicitly ideological assumptions about the course of history - assumptions that do not purport to be based on isolated facts but rather concern an inner logic to the transitions from epoch to epoch and perhaps even a purpose and overall direction to the scheme of world history. Teleology introduces a normative standard by which to judge different epochs relative to one another and this, in turn, lays the ground for viewing the present as an advance over all past epochs and the future as the site of fulfilment of present struggles and aspirations. Thus, to Benjamin, the determining characteristic of historicism in the second sense is a belief in historical *progress*. In thesis 13 he qualifies this as "the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men's ability and knowledge)," progress viewed as "something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind," and progress "regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course" (GS I:700, Ill.:260, thesis 13).
In fact, it is not the concept of progress per se that Benjamin dismisses as historicist. He is keenly aware the it was originally advanced as a critical concept, a standard by which given social arrangements could be condemned as regressive, and he is prepared to accept its applicability to specific historical developments. But when attributed to universal history the notion of progress loses its critical potential and instead becomes linked with scientistic notions of historical inevitability and rulebound necessity; in other words, with a general historicist ideology. A central aim, therefore, of Benjamin’s own philosophy of history consists in keeping concepts of progress and universal history separate and in this manner rehabilitating both. 26 This is especially evident in the notes to On the Concept of History (GS I:1223-66), but Benjamin’s basic outlook vis a vis “progress” is also nicely summarized in an entry for the Passagenwerk:

It was inevitable that the concept of progress should run up against the critical theory of history the moment that progress was no longer presented as a measure of specific historical changes, but rather as a measure of the span separating a legendary beginning from a legendary end of history. In other words: as soon as it becomes the signature of the course of history in its totality, the concept of progress is associated with an uncritical hypostatization rather than with a critical placing into question. The latter questioning can be recognized in the concrete view of history by the fact that it throws retrogression in as sharp a perspective as it does any progression. (GS V:598f., N 13,1; compare ibid.:596, N 11a,1)

From the point of view of conventional divisions in the philosophy of history, the two senses of historicism outlined here represent widely different philosophical positions,

26 In his survey of various Jewish motifs in Benjamin’s thinking, Wohlfarth sheds further light on Benjamin’s ambivalent relation to the notion of progress by presenting it as subject to the same ban on positive identification that Benjamin generally observes in connection with the use of theological, eschatological concepts (Wohlfarth 1989:186). This general theme will be taken up on several occasions below, notably in Chapter 6.
indeed positions which are often diametrically opposed. “Progress” is fundamentally an Enlightenment notion which was in fact directly challenged by the nineteenth century German historicist school, and the emphatically non-teleological approach of the latter, conversely, was presumably deeply unsatisfactory to the proponents of progress.

Nevertheless, it is possible to demonstrate that Benjamin’s two senses of historicism converge in several important respects. They have a certain compound effect which is the central premise with which Benjamin takes issue, and it is therefore not without reason that he ascribes them to the same general concept.

The first point to note is that the objectivist reconstruction of past has an inbuilt tendency to cumulate. It is closely associated with a sense of history as a valuable heritage

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27 John McCole elaborates this point: the nineteenth century historicists to which Benjamin alludes adhered to a premise of all eras being “equally close to God” (McCole 1993:291). This principle served “to ease anxieties about the implications of relativism. Since all individualities were ultimately emanations of God, the historian could confidently explore their development in their own terms, dispensing with universal standards of judgement; his account would still be objective in the only possible sense” (ibid.). According to McCole, Benjamin retained something of this outlook in the basic maxim of his Trauerspiel study that “there are no periods of decay” (cf. GS V:571, N 1.6 and GS V:575, N 2,5).

28 In his insightful review of different positions within the historicist school, Kittsteiner writes: “it is, however, undeniable that the idea of the equal rights of all generations before God remains at odds with the idea of evolutionary development” (Kittsteiner 1986:182). Kittsteiner’s overall argument is that if one were to develop certain links to historicist thinking further, “one would perhaps come to the conclusion that Benjamin stood closer to historicism ... than he himself thought” (ibid.:187). A juxtaposition of characteristic Benjaminian motifs with the key tropes in a 1932 work by Karl Heussi titled The Crisis of Historicism (Die Krisis des Historicismus, Tübingen 1932) strikingly illustrate how strongly “the experiences acquired with historicism since the beginning of the century” seem to have influenced Benjamin’s materialist position (ibid.:189ff.). Kittsteiner therefore ends up describing this as a “materialist historicism” (ibid.:214).
of a nation or a people, and taken together the different historical artifacts and data constitute a stockpile of cultural treasures. From here it is but a short step to introduce an element of diachronicity and plot the various historical records on a line of continuity, whether or not this is teleologically organized. Benjamin expresses a keen sense of this inbuilt thrust: "Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. ... Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time" (GS I:702, III.:262, thesis 17).

The next critical point is that the historian’s data, qua cultural treasures, are treated as a normative standard. Like the ideology of progress, the more static version of historicism typically treats history as exemplary, and irrespective of its claim to disinterested objectivity, it is therefore in reality expressive of vested (class) interests. Benjamin attributes this to the methodological principle of empathy itself. He notes that empathy has a tendency to go hand in hand with a certain sadness, which he explains as follows: "The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means" (GS I:696, Ill.:256, thesis 7).

This brings us to the core of Benjamin’s criticism of historicism. Despite its characteristic past-mindedness - or precisely because of it! - it invariably serves an apologetic function vis a vis established power-relations in the present. Empathy with the rulers of the past is invoked as legitimization of the privileged classes in the present, and
the celebration of cultural treasures is inevitably complicitous in this:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. ... There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. (GS I:696, III.:256, thesis 7)

Here the scientistic version of historicism converges with the overtly ideological reconstruction of history as progress whereby past wrongs are justified in the name of a better future. Like the principle of empathy, the inevitability associated with historical development legitimizes the status quo of the present. Thus both senses of historicism constitute the past as inertly available to the powers that be - a "whore" in the language of thesis 16. In Benjamin's analysis this has a "draining," i.e. paralyzing effect. The lack of urgency (as expressed in the conviction that "the truth will not run away from us;" GS I:695, III.:255, thesis 5) as well as the sheer weight of an inescapable past imposing itself on the present with the force of a curse kills any revolutionary imagination and co-opts any possible revolutionary energies: neither past nor present are open to critical assessment, nothing could have been different, and nothing can change. Thus the theme of a historiography that neutralizes the past is directly linked to a neutralization of creative, potentially subversive energies in the present. Benjamin articulates this theme in numerous variations. Konvolut N of the Passagenwerk, e.g., contains the observation that "[t]he history which showed things 'as they really were' was the strongest narcotic of the [nineteenth] century" (N 3,4). With reference to historicism as an ideology of progress,
thesis 11 comments in a similar spirit on "[t]he conformism which has been part and parcel of Social Democracy from the beginning ... Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a small step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement" (GS I:698, Ill.:258, thesis 11).

Given such a spell of inevitability dressed up as achievement, social frustrations can - to the extent that they can be conceptualized and articulated at all - only be rectified and longings only fulfilled in a hypothetical future. Thus historicism functions essentially as an instrument of deferral (Comay 1994:284). In this manner, too, the present is perpetually configured as a moment of inactivity, and potentially subversive energies are chronically neutralized. To Benjamin, this very complacency vis a vis the course of history is itself a cause for alarm and as such a potential resource by which to mobilize a sense of urgency. The key to this lies in reconceptualizing history as a site of struggle, subject to radical uncertainty. In this spirit thesis 6 defines the agenda of historical materialism:

The danger affects both the content of tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. (GS I:695, Ill.:255)
"Historical materialism"

As an antidote to historicism - that powerful narcotic handed down to us by the nineteenth century along with nationalism and other central elements of bourgeois ideology - Benjamin seeks to revitalize a sense of political agency through the articulation of a relationship with the past called “historical materialism.” In the first thesis of On the Concept of History, the historical materialist is recommended to “enlist the services of theology.” This is obviously an awkward match for an avowed Marxist, and it is therefore not surprising that the phrase “historical materialism” itself is placed in citation marks in the first thesis. This notation could be taken as an indication that Benjamin is concerned from the outset to warn the reader that the position he is about to present is radically different from that of the KP tradition, certainly from its Stalinist versions, but perhaps in certain respects even from the historical materialism of Marx and Engels themselves. This is how I read Benjamin. The citation marks are only provided once but qualify the concept of historical materialism throughout the composition. Rolf Tiedemann gives the same point a slightly different twist. He proposes that the scare quotes in thesis 1 refer the reader to the “common variety [of historical materialism] dating back to Marx and since annexed and corrupted by the politics of the Soviet Union.” This Benjamin perceives to be spurious. But, Tiedemann continues, “[t]he historical materialism without quotation marks, invoked in all subsequent theses, would then of course not be identical with the one meant in thesis I. Instead it would be its corrective” (Tiedemann 1983-84:86f.). On either reading, the critical point remains that Benjamin's historical materialism is from the outset marked as heterodox; with the aid of theology it is intended to forge “a new unity of theory and
practice” or, in other words, to “develop the theory of a different practice which might have a chance of winning the ‘match,’ the class struggle, even under altered historical circumstances” (ibid.; emphasis added).

A graphic expression of Benjamin’s willingness to challenge fundamental assumptions about the philosophy of history (Marxist or otherwise) is found in thesis 7, where the historical materialist is said to view it as his obligation “to brush history against the grain.” This gesture applies not only to the interpretation of specific historical data but also to the underlying notion of history itself. The philosophical position which Benjamin calls historical materialism is thus fundamentally about rethinking temporality as a precondition for the broader aim of rethinking practice. I propose that this involves two key aspects answering to the two central aspects of historicism identified above.

First, Benjamin’s notion of historical materialism involves an inversion of the relation between past and present. In contrast to the “past-mindedness” of historicism, Benjamin now constitutes the present as the primary point of reference and approaches the past from this perspective. “The true method to make [historical] matters present,” he

29 Benjamin himself was keenly aware that his proposed fusion of theology and Marxism would be received as controversial. In a letter to Gretel Adorno from April 1940 he states with regard to his theses on the philosophy of history that “nothing lies further from my mind than the thought of publication of these notes ... It would leave the door wide open to enthusiastic misunderstandings” (GS I:1227, compare Tiedemann 1983:71). Concerning the heterodoxy of Benjamin’s Marxism, some interesting observations are found in his notes on Korsch contained in Konvolut N entries 16-17. Here one finds reference to “the epigones of Marx who have transformed so-called ‘historical materialism’ ... into a universal social theory,” and Benjamin further quotes Korsch for the observation that the “most important advance ... of Marx has subsequently ... gone unrecognized even by ‘orthodox’ interpreters of Marx ... They have thus imposed their own philosophical backwardness on the Marxian theory ...” (N 17a).
suggests in deliberate opposition to the method of empathy, "is to imagine them in our space (not us in theirs) ... We do not transpose ourselves into them: they step into our life" (GS V:1014-15). It is on this account that Benjamin claims a "Copernican revolution" in the philosophy of history:

The Copernican turn in the conception of history is precisely this: [formerly] one took 'what has been' as the fixed point toward which present-day knowledge was attempting to grope its way. Now this relationship is to be reversed. (GS V:1057, GS V:491)

The upshot of this reversal is to undermine the merely contemplative orientation towards the past to which historicism, especially in the first version described above, is restricted. By taking its point of departure in the present, historical materialism openly acknowledges the contemporary interests that are invested in any historiography. In Benjamin's own words "politics receives primacy over history" (GS V:491). However, this is not the entire picture. The "materialist" construal of the relation between past and present is, on Benjamin's account, also subject to a second inversion as compared with the perspective of historicism. As a protective measure against the relativism\(^{30}\) inherent in ascribing a primacy to current political interests over scientific objectivity, Benjamin does not actually propose to reconstruct history on the terms of the present - something which may be said of ideological reconstructions of history as progress, "consecrat[ing] the present as the ultimate term and standard of thought as such" (Comay 1993:105) - but rather on the terms of, and indeed for the sake of, the past. In this spirit Benjamin posits an obligation of the

\(^{30}\) John McCole goes as far as to speak of a "solipsistic present-mindedness;" McCole 1993:248.
present towards the past or, more specifically, towards the victims of past oppression, the casualties of the "progress" to which we are heirs. Expressed in the theological language which Benjamin mobilizes in order to sharpen his concept of history, the historical materialist recognizes an obligation to redeem suffering in the past:

The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between the past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. (GS I:693f., III:254, thesis 2)

Viewed as one overall movement, the double inversion to which Benjamin subjects the temporality of historicism cancels out any relation of priority between past and present. What emerges instead is a relation of (asymmetrical) reciprocity between the two poles, past and present, in their common orientation towards a messianic future. This is prefigured in the concept of each pole of the relation. The concept of the past involves reference to the present both to gain definition and for its own fulfilment. We have seen this in the notion of the past containing an immanent ("secret") reference to the future; elsewhere, the same basic idea is expressed by drawing an analogy to the way in which a photographic image needs a chemical fixer in order to be developed. Quoting André Monglod, Benjamin records in his notes to the Passagenwerk that "[t]he past has left behind in literary texts images of itself that are comparable to the images which light imprints on a photosensitive plate. Only the future possesses developers active enough to bring these plates out perfectly" (GS I:1238, N 15a,1). In both cases, Benjamin presents a basic motif of the past as incomplete and hence subject to retroactive intervention. To this Horkheimer once
remarked that “[i]f one really takes incompleteness seriously, one has to believe in the Last Judgement” (N 8,1). In response, Benjamin acknowledges that to make something finished into something incomplete and something incomplete into something finished “is theology” (ibid.: my emphasis), but he is less bothered by this than Horkheimer, in part, no doubt, because theology to him means something different. It is on account of the theorem of incompletion, ultimately, that Benjamin is able to view history as a site of retroactive intervention and to invoke memory as “a retroactive force [that] will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers” (GS I:694, Ill.:255, thesis 4).

Benjamin’s concept of the present, conversely, is deeply infused with a presence of the past. Not only is the present subject to a moral obligation to the past, it is also reliant on the image of the past in order to orient itself and mobilize a sense of agency. Complementing the notion of images “coming to legibility” at a specific time, Benjamin thus submits that “[e]very present is determined by those images which are synchronic with it” (N 3,1). For the historian this sense of reciprocity between a specific past and a specific present means that the object of history is neither an epoch “reconstructed” on its own terms nor long temporal sequences organized in terms of causality and teleology. Rather, materialist historiography is based on a constructive principle directed at establishing a unique constellation between present and past vis a vis a messianic future. In this, the double inversion of temporality comes full circle: “It is not that the past casts its light on

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31 The respective positions of Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno vis a vis the use of theological tropes within a secular paradigm will be further discussed in Chapter 6.
the present or the present casts its light on the past; rather, an image\textsuperscript{32} is that in which what has been flashes together into a \textit{constellation} with the now" (GS V:576, 578; my emphasis).

The theme of history as constellation and sudden flash takes us to the second overall respect in which Benjamin's concept of historical materialism involves a radical rethinking of temporality. What we see emerging is a theme of discontinuity and fragmentation. The key target in this connection is the historicist premise of continuity and the underlying concept of time as homogeneous, which in Benjamin's analysis constitutes the precondition of the ideology of progress:

The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself. (GS I:701, III.:261, thesis 13)

Benjamin's impetus to engage in a critical intervention at this level is entirely concrete. In a world gone wrong, the writer was surrounded by evidence that the construction of history as a continuum leads to disaster with essentially the same necessity that its apologists claimed for progress. "What presents itself according to conventional piety as a progressive 'chain' of events (GS I:697, III.:257, thesis 9) - a 'smooth thread' (GS I:1233) or a consoling rosary (GS I:704, III.:263, thesis A) - is to be grasped as a burning wick" (Comay 1994:262). When first presenting this image in \textit{One-Way Street} in 1926, Benjamin conveys a combined sense of alarm and hope that the impending calamity can be reversed: "[b]efore

\textsuperscript{32} The critical importance of the notion the \textit{image} to Benjamin's historiography and philosophy of memory will be taken up in further detail below, notably in \textit{Chapter 6}. My intention at the present juncture is merely to delineate the main parameters of his concept of historical materialism.
the spark reaches the dynamite, the lighted fuse must be cut” (GS IV:122, OWS:80). A
decade later, however, when assembling material for the Passagenwerk during his exile in
Paris, the author’s tone is less optimistic. The catastrophic moment in which progress is
expected to culminate is no longer subject to deferral. Unlike the historicist promise of
happiness, the disaster is not waiting to happen; rather, the disaster is now. “That things
‘just keep going on’ is the catastrophe. It isn’t that which always lies ahead, but that which
is always given” (GS V:592).

Here, all that is left of universal history would appear to be the image of an
undifferentiated catastrophe, yet precisely this points Benjamin to the true articulation of
the notion, which is messianic / apocalyptic. In response to a mounting sense of
desperation, Benjamin thus raises the stakes of historiographical intervention in his late
work. Vis a vis the historicist lethargy with which even exponents of the political left
(notably social democrats and communists loyal to Stalin) viewed the current historical
crisis, he insists that “it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency ... this will
improve our position in the struggle against Fascism” (GS I:697, Ill.:257, thesis 8).
Subverting the dread of a catastrophic culmination of history, he turns the metaphor of
explosives against historicism itself and encourages the historical materialist to blast open
the continuum of history (GS I:702, Ill.:262, thesis 16). With respect to the
conceptualization of temporality, such interventions yield a notion of radical temporal
discontinuity - as has already been encountered in Benjamin’s historiographical emphasis
on image rather than process and likewise in the premise that the past is only accessible in
sudden flashes. This gives the idea of historical progression a peculiar staccato quality and
renders our access to vital historical resources highly uncertain: “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant of its recognizability, never to be seen again” (GS I:695, III.:255, thesis 5).

To this overall picture it must be added that the image in terms of which Benjamin approaches history is qualified as a \textit{dialectical image} and the underlying notion of dialectics itself is occasionally qualified as a \textit{dialectics at a standstill}. To the Hegelian and Marxian philosophical tradition, these are oxymoronic notions in so far as “dialectics” above all implies a \textit{process} of \textit{conceptual mediation} - i.e. anything but an imagistic standstill. Nevertheless, the implicit polemic is deliberate on Benjamin’s part. In his usage, an image is qualified as dialectical when it forms a unique and fertile constellation of incompatibles. As such, it is incapable of being taken up into the dominant narrative of progress, and the refusal to resolve the inherent contradictions through a process of mediation generates a field of heightened intellectual tension in which “sparks” can jump and illuminate an otherwise opaque political landscape. In an entry belonging to Konvolut N of the \textit{Passagenwerk}, Benjamin explains his notion of the dialectical image as follows:

Thoughts belong to thinking both in their state of motion and their state of rest. When thinking reaches a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions, the dialectical image appears. This image is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its locus is of course not arbitrary. In short, it is to be found wherever the tension between dialectical oppositions is greatest. The dialectical image is, accordingly, the very object constructed in the materialist presentation of history. It is identical with the historical object; it justifies its being blasted out of the continuum of the historical process. (N 10a,3)

In order to complete the link between historiography and politics which I have suggested structures Benjamin’s entire exposition in \textit{On the Concept of History}, it must be noted that
the materialist approach to history, according to its concept, is to prove itself by being conducive to mobilizing revolutionary energies. This is urgent; precisely because the now has been recognized as the moment of disaster, so is it also of critical importance to configure it as a moment of action. Benjamin addresses this challenge by introducing a concept of Jetztzeit - the “time of the now” - which structurally functions as the temporal equivalent of the dialectical image. Jetztzeit to Benjamin is a temporal condensation, a moment of heightened tension in which a particular historical situation - in the manner of a monad - presents itself as a crystallization of universal history. It is experienced as an instant of unique possibility, a revolutionary moment outside the undifferentiated progression of temporal instants, a moment liberated from the curse of historical necessity perceived as mythic inevitability. The central premise of Benjamin’s materialist historiography is that such heterogeneous moments constitute the substance of history itself: “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled with the presence of the now (Jetztzeit)” (GS I:701, Ill.:261, thesis 14).

Articulated in the language of theology, the time of the now is the messianic moment - the moment of redemption of past suffering. In this sense the extension of Jetztzeit to all of history recalls the traditional Jewish conception according to which “every second of time

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33 Thesis 18 of On the Concept of History probes this sense of condensed temporality by invoking an example from natural science: “In relation to the history of organic life on earth,” writes a modern biologist, “the paltry fifty millennia of homo sapiens constitute something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four-hour day. On this scale, the history of civilized mankind would fill one-fifth of the last second of the last hour.” The present, which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement, coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe” (GS I:703, Ill.:263).
was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (GS I:704, Ill.:264, thesis B).

The decisive challenge to Benjamin’s political philosophy consists in rendering this interpretation convincing and in linking it concretely with a revised, radicalized concept of practice. This, as we shall see, is an underlying aim of his philosophy of memory.

Two critical receptions

Having ventured a reconstruction of the main contrasting positions in Benjamin’s philosophy of history more or less on the author’s own terms, it is now appropriate to open up his concept of historical materialism to critical questioning. What is most striking - and most disturbing - about Benjamin’s thinking is its extreme polarity and yet the manner in which familiar, seemingly stable oppositions are continuously subverted. Vis a vis the past-mindedness of historicism, Benjamin proposes an even more radical orientation towards the past as a means to seize the present. And vis a vis a widespread surge of cultural pessimism, he presents an even more bleak view of civilization, historical development, and the politics of his age precisely as a means of rekindling hope. The inherent paradoxicality of this intellectual strategy is deliberate and points to a fundamental theme in Benjamin’s scholarship concerning the construal of oppositions. This is in turn closely linked with a strategy of immanent critique, which will be taken up in further detail in Chapter 3. In a letter to Scholem from 1926, Benjamin expresses a determination “[t]o proceed always radically, never consistently [immer radikal, niemals konsekvent] in the most important things” (Corr.:300, *B:425). To a scholarly audience, such a commitment to relentlessly pushing beyond deadlocked conceptual oppositions holds an immense intellectual appeal.
But from a practical point of view the question remains: is the strategy politically viable? Does Benjamin's reconceptualization of historical materialism in fact revitalize genuine revolutionary energies and does it translate into a sound concept of practice?

In Benjamin's reception history - i.e. since his scholarly legacy was rescued from oblivion through the joint effort of Adorno and Scholem in the mid-1950s - the overwhelming tendency has been to fixate on his "impossible" fusion of theology and Marxism. Paradoxically, this relationship is particularly ambiguous in the very passage in which it is most extensively described. In the opening thesis of *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin presents the image of the inanimate puppet in Turkish garment called 'historical materialism' "enlisting the services" of a hidden dwarf - 'theology' - which is in turn pulling the puppet's strings. In this "pair of sideshow freaks" (Comay 1994:260), it is altogether unclear who is actually directing whom, but nevertheless, the constellation is "supposed to be" a winning ticket. How so? During the first three decades of Benjamin scholarship, the ambiguous relation between Marxism and theology presented an almost insurmountable stumbling block. To be sure, the difficulty in making sense of - and measuring up to the complexity of - Benjamin's intellectual cum political position was partly a function of the unemployed and politically and religiously unaffiliated thinker's personal biography. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, Benjamin made a point of cultivating and remaining loyal to multiple mutually incompatible circles of friends, and it is said that

34 In the published version of the text, Benjamin states categorically that historical materialism "can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology which today, as is well known, is wizened and has to keep out of sight" (GS I:693, III.:253, thesis 1). In an earlier version of the text, however, he is somewhat less confident and only pronounces that the puppet will win "if it is up to me" (GS I:1247).
he sometimes went out of his way to keep them separate from one another (Habermas 1988:92). Following his death, several of these groups (or their intellectual heirs) then felt justified in laying exclusive claim to Benjamin's authentic legacy. In this manner, commentators became divided into several bitterly opposed camps and this in turn led to an image of Benjamin himself as an inconsistent, schizophrenic thinker. Benjamin's work was meticulously dissolved into the very polarized positions that he had painstakingly juxtaposed and destabilized, and each camp was inclined to dismiss the parts of the authorship that did not fit their particular stance as spurious, unauthentic, or unessential - either the result of a wavering on Benjamin's own part, or the outcome of the corrupting influences of bad company. This is, e.g., how Brecht was viewed by both Scholem and Adorno, each of whom, however, was also critical of the other's influence on Benjamin.35

Against the inclination to view Benjamin as an inconsistent and indecisive thinker, the past two to three decades have been witness to a new wave of what Habermas has called "Benjamin philology that relates to its subject in a scholarly fashion" (Habermas 1988:91). These are Benjamin readings that in relation to the earlier controversies are fundamentally non-partisan and instead committed to responding constructively to the challenge presented by Benjamin of re-examining and pushing beyond entrenched divisions in political philosophy. Two early exponents of this trend are Habermas himself and Rolf Tiedemann, both of whom were originally pupils of Adorno.36

35 For a detailed, insightful overview of the early stages of Benjamin reception, see Gaber 1987:121ff.

36 Since Adorno's death, Tiedemann served as the principal editor of Benjamin's collected works, the Suhrkamp edition Gesammelte Schriften.
In the following, I will review a seminal article by each of these authors, namely 
Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique by Habermas (originally published in 1972; 
English version 1988) and Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An 
Interpretation of the Theses “On the Concept of History” by Tiedemann (originally 
published in 1975; English version 1983). As is evident by their titles, both of these articles 
are devoted to clarifying the mutual standing of theology and materialist theory, and in so 
doing both offer an interpretation of Benjamin’s concept of historical materialism and an 
evaluation of the viability of the implied political agenda. At the face of it, the two authors 
reach virtually opposite conclusions, yet they structure their arguments in strikingly similar 
terms and, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, presuppose certain important common 
premises. It is precisely these premises, I believe, that need to be exposed and re-examined 
if a new generation of Benjamin scholarship is to effectively free itself of the legacy of 
partisan polemics and form a fresh estimation of Benjamin’s concept of practice. Although 
Tiedemann’s essay is the more recent of the two, I shall in the present connection review its 
central argument first.

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37 It must be noted that Habermas appears to have substantially changed his position on Benjamin in the course of the 1980s. Already in his lectures on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity he develops a considerably more receptive Benjamin reading, and in connection with his participation in the so-called Historikerstreit, he repeatedly invokes a Benjaminian position, in particular in the form of an uncompromising commitment to “anamnestic solidarity” with victims in the past (Habermas 1985b & 1987). My reason for nevertheless concentrating on Habermas earlier article in the present context is, firstly, that it marks what may now be identified as a classical position in contemporary Benjamin reception and, secondly, that it nicely brings out the implicit contrast in Benjamin’s philosophy to certain Hegelian and Hegelian Marxist motifs.
In terms of textual references, Tiedemann largely restricts his analysis of Benjamin’s historiography to the observations contained in *On the Concept of History* itself and to various earlier drafts and notes associated with this text to which he in his capacity as editor of Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften* was privy prior to their publication. The article begins by summarizing some of the central theological tropes in Benjamin’s overtly political thinking and then makes the polemical point that the opposition between theology and materialist theory is usually misconstrued. To view it as one of mutual exclusion - seeing religion merely as the “opium of the people” - is certainly premature. According to Tiedemann, the philosophy of the Enlightenment builds on a theological content that is so deeply absorbed that is barely noticeable. This is true of Marxian thinking as well, not least when it comes to ideas relating to the theory of revolution and to the philosophy of history: “Aside from the critique of political economy in the narrow sense, the principle theories of Marx, hence equally the doctrines of historical materialism, can in intellectual history indeed be seen as secularizations of originally religious ideas” (Tiedemann 1983-84:83).

Thus, by re-invoking theology, Benjamin is not actually proposing anything scandalous and is not necessary at odds with Marxist theory. To the contrary, Tiedemann maintains that he is consistently careful to stay on solid materialist ground when employing theological tropes. “Whenever Benjamin’s language in the historico-philosophical theses invokes anew the theological origin of Marxian concepts, the secularized content of these ideas is always maintained. The Messiah, redemption, the angel and the Antichrist appear in the theses as images, analogies, and parables, not literally” (ibid.:83). But if a certain
theological content has already been absorbed by the secularized philosophical tradition, and if Benjamin remains faithful to this, then why bother to once again invoke explicitly theological concepts? Why is it that Benjamin "at certain points ... translates back into the language of theology that which Marx 'had secularized'"? (ibid.). Stated in broader terms, why reopen the relation between political philosophy and theology? Tiedemann quotes an oft-cited passage from the *Passagenwerk*, where Benjamin suggests that his thinking relates to theology as "the blotter ... to the ink. It is soaked with it. If it were up to the blotting paper, [however,] nothing of what is written would remain" (GS V:588, N 7a,7). To this Tiedemann remarks that "[t]he historico-philosophical theses demonstrate that it is not up to the blotter. Apparently there are reasons beyond the control of thinking that make it let some theology remain, make it readable again" (Tiedemann 1983-84:84). The same point could be made with reference to the dwarf of thesis 1: given the prevalence of theological tropes in Benjamin's adaptation of historical materialism, he does not in fact keep completely out of sight. Why?

We shall in the course of the present study encounter a range of different answers to this basic question. A distinct possibility, which is not considered by Tiedemann, is that theology means something fundamentally different to Benjamin - something different from what it means to Tiedemann himself but also from what it means to the Enlightenment tradition (and by implication to both Hegel and Marx) which is said to have secularized the essential theological ideas. By all indications theology to Benjamin is not something that can be secularized; it is not, in other words, an expression of particular (clouded) ideas which can be taken up without residue within a different (more lucid) paradigm. Rather, it
denotes a *manner* of thinking, a cognitive form, which is indispensable for the purpose of gaining a critical perspective on the present.

In making this suggestion, I am getting considerably ahead of myself. Our current concern is Tiedemann's Benjamin reading, and on this account Benjamin re-invokes theological tropes essentially for the purpose of distancing himself from the "historical materialism" of the Third International and, in the same spirit, for the purpose of reviving a central dimension of Marxist revolutionary thought which had in the meantime become lost from sight. To substantiate this interpretation, Tiedemann summarizes Benjamin's increasingly skeptical attitude towards Soviet communism in the course of the 1930s - a reservation which intensified during the Moscow trials and turned into complete disillusionment after the Hitler - Stalin non-aggression pact in 1939. The Social Democratic movement, similarly, proved in the course of the 1930s to be no match for the forces of Fascism. In this context of imminent historical disaster and disillusionment with the organized movements on the political left (both of which were historicist in the worst sense), Benjamin turns to theology paradoxically as a way of reconnecting with objective history: "In order to be able to catch up with real history again, historical materialism must return *beyond* philosophy to *theology*" (ibid.:87). At first sight, the appeal to theology may be perceived as a retreat from the political. Benjamin himself acknowledges this impulse in thesis 10, where he invokes the image of a monastic seclusion from world affairs, but this image is on Tiedemann's account to be viewed as a metaphor of distance rather than an actual retreat from the struggle against fascism: "Benjamin is too much of a materialist to be able to withdraw from 'the world and its affairs' for long, or even to wish to do so"
Instead, the reintroduction of overtly theological concepts into the discourse of political philosophy becomes a vehicle for Benjamin to rethink the relationship between theory and practice and to define an alternate, radicalized concept of revolutionary practice which builds on an "interrelationship between historiography and politics" (ibid.; GS I:1248). This, fundamentally, is the aim of On the Concept of History.

Given this sympathetic reconstruction of Benjamin's intellectual agenda, Tiedemann proceeds to question its viability and practical implications. Did Benjamin actually succeed in defining a concept of practice that could measure up to the political exigencies of his age? To this Tiedemann is going to answer a resounding: No! In keeping with Benjamin's commitment to link historiography with the concept of a radical political practice, he views the Theses as devoted to defining a situation in which the historical materialist once again becomes united with the struggling classes - "with the people who 'make' history" (ibid.:93). Under the altered historical circumstances of late capitalism, both need to seize the moment and explode the continuum of history. And in order to accomplish this, the proletariat needs to revive an image of itself as "the avenging class" and "relearn its 'hatred and spirit of sacrifice'" (ibid., GS I:700). Thus, the central feature of Benjamin's political theory is, on Tiedemann's account, that it undertakes to "bring back into the field the destructive energies of historical materialism which have been immobilized for so long" (ibid., GS I:1240). This leads to a revolutionary agenda resonating with strong theological undertones. The proletariat is depicted virtually as an agent of divine retribution, and in a note from the drafts for the theses Benjamin describes the task of historical materialism as a matter of "interconnect[ing] revolutionary destruction"
and the idea of redemption” (ibid.:94, GS I:1241).

In the end Tiedemann views this strategy as “actionistic naivete” (ibid.:93). He does not trust the implied transformation of “destructive energies” into “sensible political practice” (ibid.:94). “Reintroduced into direct action as praxis, this can only be regressive” (ibid.). By the same token, Tiedemann mistrusts Benjamin’s commitment to bring about “a real state of emergency” (GS I:697, III.:257, thesis 8). He notes emphatically that “this was not how Marx imagined the conclusion of the pre-history of human society. And the revolution which would bring about this state of emergency would also be far from the proletarian revolution Marx hoped for: it would be an apocalyptic destruction, an eschatological finish. The historical materialist who disguises himself as the ‘angel of history’ may not be one after all” (ibid.:94f.).

The central problem with Benjamin’s concept of revolution is that it has a tendency - reflecting the political impasse of the World War II years - to become a purpose in its own right rather than a means to achieve social justice. Thus, even if Benjamin ostensibly secularizes messianic expectations in the idea of a classless society, Tiedemann charges that “the instrument of this secularization becomes fetishized. End and means - the classless society and the revolution - are reversed” (ibid.:95). Politically, this remains ineffective - “merely Münchhausen’s attempt to pull himself out of the quagmire by his own hair” (ibid.:96). And when Benjamin suggests that “[i]n reality there is not a single moment which does not bring with it its own revolutionary opportunity” (ibid., GS I:1231), Tiedemann retorts that “[t]his is no analysis of reality, but rather the impotent proclamation that salvation is indeed at hand in spite of all the barriers presented to it by actual
conditions" (ibid.). Thus his final verdict on Benjamin's concept of practice is dismissive:

In the historico-philosophical theses, Benjamin is about to leap out of historical materialism into the realm of political Messianism where nothing can be done at all. ... The theologizing terminology of the theses announces both claims: it attempts to preserve the content of the proletarian revolution within the concept of the Messiah, the classless society within the messianic age and class struggle within messianic power. At the same time, the revolution which does not come is supposed to be standing at the gate at any moment, like the Messiah. There, in some historical beyond, it can quickly put together a classless society, even if it is nowhere to be seen around here. The retranslation of materialism into theology cannot avoid the risk of losing both: the secularized content may dissolve while the theological idea evaporates. (ibid.: 96)

In the final section of his article, however, Tiedemann all but retracts the dismissive conclusion that he has just reached and which I have quoted at length. He submits that the untenable theory of revolution that would appear to be contained in the theses arises from reading Benjamin's text as a "handbook for action." But this is a misconception. To read the theses as a set of "instructions" for actual political interventions would involve positing an external relationship between theory and practice, which is precisely what Benjamin himself was concerned to avoid. "At least here, and not only here, Benjamin does indeed preserve an authentically Marxian insight" (ibid.), which is that theory and practice must be intrinsically related. The concept of praxis intended by historical materialism must be contained as the immanent telos of theory; it is, in other words, a matter of "theory itself becoming practical" (ibid.:97).

On Tiedemann's final interpretation, Benjamin remains committed to this standard

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38 Adorno's influence upon Tiedemann is particularly noticeable at this juncture. Adorno too repeatedly expressed concern that Benjamin's direct fusion of Marxism and theology was to the detriment of both - hence his call for more theology, not less!
(which is essentially a Hegelian construal of the relation between theory and practice) but is unable to actually meet it. Hence the "game of hide-and-seek" in Benjamin's text, and hence the author's reluctance to see the text published: "not only did he wish to avoid misunderstandings, but perhaps more than that, he considered the work to be incomplete" (ibid.). In this light, Tiedemann proposes that it is necessary to treat On the Concept of History as a fragmentary document which in many parts has the character of "working hypotheses," which does not "permit a completely consistent interpretation," and which fails to provide a plausible account of revolutionary practice. But the crux of Tiedemann's argument is that this should not be viewed as a theoretical failure attributable to Benjamin alone. To the contrary, by once again posing the question of practice in radical terms, Benjamin more clearly than any other Marxist thinker of his age exposes what Tiedemann calls an "objective degeneration" of revolutionary theory. Paradoxically, therefore, "the incomparable significance of the theses for the state of Marxist theory in 1940 lies in what they are unable to accomplish ..." (ibid., my emphasis). In the meanwhile, the question of what would count as a radical practice remains unresolved. And according to Tiedemann, this accounts for the continued relevance of Benjamin's insistence on working intellectually within a field of tension between theological and materialistic impulses:

Theology would well have been abandoned as long as its secular content was preserved in the workers' movement. But even theological ideas take on new relevance when the class struggle comes to a halt in the authoritarian state ... Then historical materialism must again 'enlist the services' of theology ... True theology points toward materialism and only true materialism brings theology home. (ibid.:99)
Habermas’ Benjamin reading

Habermas’ 1972 Benjamin exposition entitled *Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique* (Habermas 1988) takes its point of departure, not in Benjamin’s philosophy of history (as has been the focus of this chapter so far) but rather in the aesthetic theory contained in the 1936 essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. It is particularly Benjamin’s notion of art criticism and its relation to political practice that Habermas is concerned to elucidate, his key point being that this follows a pattern of a *rescuing critique* which is unique to Benjamin and in several important respects different from the Hegelian Marxist notion of ideology critique. In this manner, Habermas too forms a critical assessment of Benjamin’s politics with a special view to the significance attributed to forging relations with the past. In the course of his exposition Habermas draws repeatedly on Benjamin’s theses on the philosophy of history, but what is equally important is that the emphasis he places on the realm of aesthetics naturally focuses attention on the category of *experience*, which in Benjamin’s perspective takes on a critical political significance in the current political context. This is a link, moreover, which will be found to be pivotal to Benjamin’s philosophy of memory and which will be drawn out in closer detail in *Chapter 3* of the present study.

With reference to Herbert Marcuse’s essay *The Affirmative Character of Culture* (which like Benjamin’s *Work of Art* essay was also published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, but one year later), Habermas identifies as one of the main features of Marxist ideology critique the persistent exposure of claims to universality on the part of bourgeois cultural institutions as in reality expressions of particular class interests. In
Habermas' words, it "uncovers within the apparently universal interests the particular interests of the ruling classes" (Habermas 1988:117). The key here is that ideology critique thereby negates bourgeois ideology by its own implicit standards. This is possible, according to the underlying philosophy of history, due to a social dynamic whereby the rise of capitalism continuously produces possibilities of liberation and social justice while at the same time systematically denying their realization. Bourgeois liberal society chronically fails to realize its own agenda, and by making this contrast visible ideology critique points to a revolutionary agenda which is intrinsically linked to the central political oppositions at the given stage of technological and economic development.

Conceptually speaking, the critical intervention against bourgeois cultural institutions that is practised by ideology critique is to be understood as a sublation or overcoming. The German (Hegelian) concept of Aufhebung has no exact counterpart in English but denotes a negation which at the same time preserves the essential content at a different level of philosophical insight or political discourse. Applied to the particular spheres of culture - such as religion, philosophy, and art, which in the bourgeois era each display a tendency to become separate and self-contained - ideology critique aims at exploding the apparent isolation and autonomy of the given sphere with a view to reintegrating its essential contents, the element of truth, within the general political process. Art criticism thus targets the affirmative expressions of ostensibly autonomous art and reveals the beautiful illusion which they project to be a reflection of unfulfilled social ideals and longings. But precisely because the illusion of social harmony and fulfilment attained within the isolated medium of the aesthetic is denied in reality, its artistic expression serves
as a measure of existing social wrong and thereby, through the mediation of ideology
 critique, provides content and focus to an agenda of radical social change.

In relation to this art, Marcuse makes good the claim of ideology critique to take at
its word the truth that is articulated in bourgeois ideals but has been reserved to the
sphere of the beautiful illusion - that is to overcome art as a sphere split off from
reality. ... If the beautiful illusion is the medium in which bourgeois society actually
expresses its own ideals but at the same time hides the fact that they are held in
suspend, then the practice of ideology critique on art leads to the demands that
autonomous art be overcome and that culture in general be reintegrated into the
material processes of life. (ibid.:93)

According to Habermas, Benjamin departs radically from this paradigm of art criticism on
several counts. In contrast to the agenda laid out by Marcuse, Benjamin's art criticism
“behaves conservatively towards its objects” (ibid.:98). But then it also targets an entirely
different realm of the aesthetic: not the “exemplary forms of bourgeois art” (ibid.:96) such
as Marcuse but rather various “nonaffirmative forms of art” which are themselves
“suggestive of critique” (ibid.). These are, notably, the aesthetic expressions of
marginalized figures and epochs of so-called decline, modernist art, and - to a certain
extent, although contentiously so - mass art in the era of technological reproduction. All of
these have it in common that they are allegorical forms of art that express "the experience
of the passionate, the oppressed, the unreconciled, and the failed" as opposed to "a
symbolic art that prefigures and aims for positive happiness, freedom, reconciliation, and
fulfilment" (ibid.). In an age of pervasive commodification and reification of human
relations, allegorical art targets a dimension of experience which is constantly threatened by
the force of forgetting. It is in this spirit that Habermas reads the passage in thesis 5 of On
the Concept of History stating that “every image of the past that is not recognized by the
present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (ibid.:99). Hence the need for a rescuing strategy, a model of art criticism which can preserve the core of vital experience in non-affirmative art by transposing "what is worth knowing from the medium of the beautiful into that of the true and thereby ... rescu[ing] it" (ibid.).

In Habermas’ interpretation, this strategy of art criticism epitomizes Benjamin’s intended fusion of theology and historical materialism. It presents a primary example of exercising the ‘weak messianic power’ with which every generation according to Benjamin has been endowed. In this respect, it takes the form of a retroactive intervention which is obligated by the suffering of past generations. At the same time, Benjamin’s rescuing critique is envisioned as the vehicle of a radicalized politics of the present. Unlike theological / religious models which remain restricted to an experience of something mystical and private, the insight which Benjamin seeks to wrest from the experience of nonaffirmative art is emphatically exoteric. His programme of art criticism is expressly oriented towards a profane illumination, and the current shift in the realm of the aesthetic towards the creation and technological reproduction of non-auratic mass art entails, in Benjamin’s interpretation, a removal of art from an esoteric, cultic context and its reintegration within an explicitly politicized context.39

Nevertheless, Habermas maintains that the intellectual strategy with which Benjamin replaces the more conventional Marxist agenda of consciousness-raising critique is politically ineffective. In spite of its radical intentions, the strategy of a rescuing critique

39 In the Work of Art essay, one of the primary meanings of the notion of aura is what Benjamin describes as the “cult value” of an art work (GS I:480ff. & n8, Ill.: 223f. & 244, n6).
provides no effective bulwark against the false overcoming of culture as evidenced, e.g., by
the mass media, advertising, and fascist propaganda. (Art in the age of mechanical
reproduction reveals itself, after all, not to be unequivocally non-affirmative.) This,
according to Habermas, is a problem which Benjamin shares with Marcuse. But in a verdict
similar to that of Tiedemann, Habermas further argues that Benjamin’s rescuing critique
lacks a solid connection with the material conditions which on any Marxist conception must
remain the central target of political intervention. Habermas does not directly accuse
Benjamin’s fusion of theology and historical materialism of leading to an anarcho-
voluntarism or “actionistic naivete,” but like Tiedemann he reaches the conclusion that “an
immanent relation to political praxis is by no means to be gained from rescuing critique, as
it is from consciousness-raising critique” (ibid.:117). In so far as the underlying aim of
ideology critique is to realize the unfulfilled social potential of capitalism - the latent
promise which capitalism itself constantly denies - it entails a clear political programme
that is intrinsically responsive to the level of the economic and technological development
of society. “When it uncovers within apparently universal interests the particular interest of
the ruling classes, ideology critique is a political force. Insofar as it shakes the normative
structures that hold the consciousness of the oppressed captive and comes to term in
political action, ideology critique aims to dismantle the structural violence invested in
institutions” (Habermas 1988:117). In contrast, Benjamin’s idiosyncratic version of
historical materialism is, on Habermas’ reading, restricted to a theory of experience which
manifests itself in a “conservative-revolutionary” hermeneutics that is oriented exclusively
towards a rescue of semantic potential and which Benjamin therefore “has to divest ... of
the attributes of purposive rational action" (ibid.:119). This is not politically viable: "The liberation from cultural tradition of semantic potentials that must not be lost to the messianic condition is not the same as the liberation of political domination from structural violence" (ibid.:120).

Even given this dismissive verdict, it is precisely in the emphasis on a "conservative-revolutionary hermeneutics" (ibid.:124) that Habermas sees Benjamin's lasting significance. In a pun on the relation between theology and Marxism outlined in the first thesis on the concept of history, he proposes to "enlist the services' of Benjamin's theory of experience for historical materialism" (ibid.:120). This leads him to the conclusion, similar to that of Tiedemann, that Benjamin's primary contribution to materialist theory consisted in revitalizing the utopian aspect of Marxist thinking and radicalizing the notion of the revolution. To support this view, Habermas submits that the process of domination and exploitation that Marxism has traditionally reacted against also needs to be recognized as a process of exhausting semantic potentials. This in effect constitutes a different type of repression - a repression which is consistent with rising prosperity and which is increasingly becoming characteristic of developed societies under late capitalism. According to Habermas, Benjamin was among the first to thematize this a sustained manner. By recognizing that the social changes which in historicist thinking pass as progress do not necessarily bring fulfilment, Benjamin expanded the entire vocabulary of Marxist thinking: "In the tradition that reaches back to Marx, Benjamin was one of the first to emphasize a further moment in the concepts of exploitation and progress: besides hunger and oppression, failure; besides prosperity and liberty, happiness" (ibid.:121).
Precisely the experiential dimension of social existence must, in Habermas' view, be regarded as indispensable to any contemporary revolutionary theory. In light of "the possibility of a meaningless emancipation," Benjamin's model of rescuing critique takes on a new significance. While it does not function directly as an instrument of revolutionary change, it mobilizes resources which may be regarded as a necessary condition of the latter: "The claim to happiness can be made good only if the sources of that semantic potential we need for interpreting the world in light of our needs are not exhausted" (ibid.). Ultimately, on Habermas' account, it is his profound understanding of this connection that marks Benjamin's lasting contribution to Marxist critical theory.

**Hegelian presuppositions**

In comparing these two interpretations of Benjamin's messianic Marxism, one is struck both by their similarities and their differences. The respective titles pose essentially the same question and the arguments are structured in analogous ways, yet as far as Benjamin's politics is concerned, the two authors reach seemingly opposite conclusions. Tiedemann emphasizes what is often called the liquidationist element in Benjamin's cultural critique and sees the corresponding political agenda as verging on anarchism - a revolutionary romanticism seeking violence and destruction largely for its own sake. Habermas, to the contrary, emphasizes Benjamin's impulse to rescue elements of the cultural tradition that are threatened by forces of marginalization and forgetting. He thereby portrays Benjamin as a fundamentally conservative thinker. At one point in Tiedemann's article this comes to an open disagreement. Tiedemann quotes Habermas for the
observation that Benjamin “detached himself from his early anarchistic tendencies” but
takes issue with this and suggests that while “many of the texts from Benjamin’s middle
period can be given such an interpretation; the late works - not merely the historico-
philosophical theses, but also the texts on Baudelaire - demonstrate meanwhile that such
attempts are failures” (Tiedemann 1983:103f., n74).

Undoubtedly this difference of interpretation is indicative of an inherent ambiguity
in Benjamin’s writing, which is to say that each author highlights a genuine aspect of
Benjamin’s thought which stands in a relation of tension with the other. What is more
important in my view, however, is that although the two critics come at Benjamin’s
political agenda from different angles, their respective assessments build on the same basic
philosophical premises. It is thus significant that both authors dismiss Benjamin’s concept
of practice on account of its alleged lack of mediation with objective reality. The common
complaint is , in other words, that Benjamin fails to establish an immanent relation between
theory and practice\(^{40}\) - immanent in the sense of practice informing theory and theory
already figuring as a moment of practice without being reducible to the latter. His concept
of a revolutionary practice therefore remains detached from the material and social
conditions of the age. It is externally imposed and his proposed political agenda is

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\(^{40}\) See Tiedemann 1983:97f., Habermas 1988:119. It must be noted, however, that
important strands of Western Marxism, of which Habermas’ own *Theory and Practice* is a
key expression, to a certain extent *de-link* theory and practice, thus allowing for the
development of a Marxist theory and body of scholarship that is not (under the current
circumstances) directly transferable into revolutionary action. Adorno too, needless to say,
is a powerful exponent of this current of post-War political philosophy. In this perspective,
the complaint against Benjamin must be understood to mean that his invocation of practice
is too immediate; in other words, that he conflates theory and practice rather than bring out
the genuine dialectical tension between the two.
accordingly dismissed as unrealistic, voluntaristic, regressive, or naive.

The objection that Benjamin’s social analysis and political philosophy is compromised by insufficient dialectical mediation is the fundamental point raised by Adorno in his personal correspondence with Benjamin during the second half of the 1930s, notably in response to The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction and to the 1938 Baudelaire study titled The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire.41 (Both pieces were sponsored by and submitted to the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung of which Adorno was an editor.) In response to the latter study Adorno wrote: “Let me express myself here in as simple and Hegelian a manner as possible. If I am not mistaken, this dialectic lacks one thing: mediation. The primary tendency is always to relate the pragmatic content of Baudelaire’s work directly to proximate characteristics of the social history of the time, and preferably economic characteristics when possible” (Corr.:581). In order to avoid this weakness, Adorno maintained, Benjamin would need to develop his thinking much more carefully at the level of theory (conceivably arriving at a notion of dialectics resembling Adorno’s own “negative dialectics” - which, of course, only achieved its consummate expression twenty-some years later). At the political level, Adorno attributed the false immediacy of Benjamin’s revolutionary commitments to Brecht’s corrupting influence.42

41 For a detailed and insightful, although perhaps sometimes slightly misguided, review of the “Adorno - Benjamin dispute,” see Wolin 1994:163ff.

42 He therefore took it upon himself to defend the Benjamin’s true intellectual disposition - his “innermost being” (Wohlfarth 1978:195) - against this: “Indeed, I feel that our theoretical disagreement is not really a discord between us but rather, that it is my task to hold your arm steady until the sun of Brecht has once more sunk into exotic waters” (Adorno 1995: 175). In his seminal essay on The Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections, 1978:195f., Wohlfarth discusses this point in informative detail and ends
However, while variations of this basic complaint mark a persistent feature of Adorno's Benjamin reception throughout, it is only one aspect of a rich and complex relation in which the author of *Negative Dialectics* incorporates core elements of Benjamin's thinking and perhaps also brings out important latent aspects of this through the subsequent development of his own philosophy. In the course of the present study, I develop Benjamin's philosophy of memory in an on-going - although far from systematic - dialogue with Adorno. The charge of inadequate dialectical mediation and the concomitant charge of political voluntarism are at the present juncture attributed to Habermas and Tiedemann because these authors articulate it in a simpler and more "conventional" form which directly accentuates the contrast between Benjamin's proclaimed "historical materialism" and a Hegelian / Marxist dialectics.

The crucial point at the present juncture is thus that both readings reviewed here in effect measure Benjamin against a Hegelian standard. This is, briefly stated, that the central role of philosophy consists in mediating between subjective and objective spirit, i.e., on the one hand, reconciling the alienated subject with existing social institutions and, on the other hand, realizing the liberational potential contained in the latter. Any left-Hegelian version of this agenda is going to insist that the envisioned reconciliation can only be accomplished through radical social change, and Marxists add that this means political revolution, but in all cases the underlying Hegelian premise is retained not only in the end goal of a comprehensive mediation between the subject and his or her social environment but also in

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up defending Benjamin (to a certain extent) on strategic political grounds: "Rather than let himself be protected against himself, Benjamin urges politics against Adorno, metaphysics against Brecht, and exposes his innermost being to their tension" (Wohlfarth 1978:196).
the stipulation that the revolutionary possibility itself must be supported by the given technological, economic, and political development. According to both Habermas and Tiedemann, this is where Benjamin fails. He does not anchor his revolutionary radicalism in an objective analysis of existing historical and political conditions, and his so-called materialist agenda is therefore untrustworthy.

It is in this connection noteworthy that explicit references to Hegel occur in both texts in question precisely at the point of explicating the central alternative to Benjamin's model of critique. In Habermas, this is the figure of ideology critique which, through Marcuse, is attributed directly to Hegel. In Tiedemann, similarly, Hegel is brought up in connection with the crucial notion of practice as theory's immanent telos - a notion which Tiedemann submits that Benjamin accepts but is unable to accomplish (Tiedemann 1983:96f.). Whether Benjamin actually does subscribe to this Hegelian trope is another matter, but this is not what is at issue in the present context. The important point is rather that the very invocation of Hegelian premises by both authors presents us with an important counterpart to - or perhaps better, an important foil for - Benjamin's political philosophy and philosophy of history. In Habermas' text, the opposition between ideology critique and rescuing critique is played out at virtually every level of Benjamin's thinking. It is shown to structure his aesthetics, his literary criticism, his philosophy of history, and aspects of his esoteric philosophy of language. If this interpretation is correct, which I believe it is, it may

43 As has been discussed above, even Adorno, whom Tiedemann generally follows in his critique of Benjamin, refused any immanent connection between theory and practice on historical grounds. For an evocative statement of Adorno’s position, see the short piece addressing the 1960s student movement titled Resignation (Adorno 1991:171ff.).
be taken as a strong indication of how important the opposition to Hegel actually is to Benjamin’s entire philosophical project from the mid-1920s and onwards. At several critical junctures this is exactly about challenging key Hegelian assumptions, even if these are rarely identified as such by Benjamin himself. In fact, Benjamin often appropriates a certain Hegelian or Hegelian Marxist terminology but subverts the meaning through heterodox usage. This pattern of an immanent critique is especially noticeable in connection with Benjamin’s appropriation of the language of dialectics, as we have seen, and I believe that it accounts for much of the paradoxical feel of his writing.

However, to accept the conceptual opposition around which both critics structure their reading of Benjamin does not necessarily entail sharing their negative verdict on Benjamin’s politics - and by implication his revised, radicalized notion of historical materialism. In contrast to both authors reviewed above, I propose that the breach with a Hegelian figure of dialectical mediation should not necessarily be viewed as a point against Benjamin. If it is correct that this philosophical trope is among the basic premises which Benjamin himself devotes much of his late authorship to opposing, then this conceptual opposition needs to be subjected to “non-partisan” examination - which is to say, in other words, that the Hegelian presuppositions by which Benjamin is critiqued themselves need

44 There is evidence that Benjamin’s fundamental opposition to Hegelian thinking dates back to his formative years as an intellectual. Recalling on the early phases of their friendship, Scholem makes mention of a meeting with Benjamin in 1916 when the conversation turned to Hegel: “Evidently Benjamin had read only a few things superficially and was no great admirer of Hegel at that time. As much as a year later he wrote to me: ‘What I have read of Hegel thus far has definitely repelled me.’ He called Hegel’s ‘mental physiognomy ... that of an intellectual brute, a mystic of violence, the worst kind there is: but a mystic for all that’ [B:171, Corr.:112f.]” (Scholem 1982:30).
to be subjected to critical scrutiny. To address the question concerning the viability of Benjamin’s politics more closely on Benjamin’s terms will involve an examination of his analysis of modernity and concomitant notion of decentred subjectivity, and it will lead us to consider how to understand his concept of “awakening” in comparison with the more familiar Hegelian Marxist agenda of consciousness-raising.

A further Hegelian premise with which Benjamin implicitly takes issue, as indicated above, concerns the possibility and desirability of secularizing religious ideas. Hegel undertakes this in a systematic manner in the transition from chapter 7 to chapter 8 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and it may be suggested that Tiedemann takes the task to have been accomplished so decisively that his foremost concern is to explain why Benjamin would even consider reintroducing explicitly theological motifs. His answer that this is due to a trivialization of the theological content originally informing Marxist theory presupposes the paradigm of secularization itself, but perhaps Benjamin’s true motivation is different. Perhaps theology to him is not a reservoir of clouded ideas which can be secularized - and hence clarified - without residue but rather a manner of thinking, a manner of configuring temporality and construing critical perspectives on the present.

These are all questions that will be taken up again in subsequent chapters of this study. However, as an important step towards a more comprehensive concept of practice, it is relevant already at the present juncture to expand the focus and complement Benjamin’s analysis of the concept of history with a set of parallel reflections on the concept of memory. This is how Benjamin himself contextualizes the question of practice, broadly defined.
Politicizing memory

In his response to Horkheimer's observation, cited earlier, concerning the theological bent of the notion of an incomplete past, Benjamin remarks that "[t]he corrective to this line of thought lies in the consideration that history is not only a science, but equally a form of remembrance [Eingedenken]. What science has 'established,' Eingedenken can modify. Eingedenken can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete" (GS V:589, N 8,1). In thesis 6 of On the Concept of History, similarly, Benjamin states that "[t]o articulate the past historically ... means to seize hold of a memory [eine Erinnerung] as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (GS I:695, III.:255, thesis 6). And in the concluding thesis he invokes the nexus of Jewish remembrance45 and Jewish messianic expectation as exemplary of an experience of time that is not homogeneous and empty (GS I:704, III.:264, thesis B). This, of course, is the experience of time that Benjamin seeks to mobilize for the cause of historical materialism.

What these passages have in common is that they all demonstrate a clear interlinkage of historiography and memory in Benjamin's late writing. Benjamin's efforts to politicize the past are, in other words, directed not only at the concept of history but with equal force at the philosophy of memory. Numerous other passages could be cited to the same effect. In some cases Benjamin's concept of historical materialism is seen to involve a

45 "Eingedenken," here invoked in the sense of Zakhor indicating a duty to remembrance for the sake of the redemption of the dead.
direct reference to memory, i.e. to presuppose a certain concept of memory, whereas other
passages suggest a general parallelism between historiography and memory indicating that
the key observations and oppositions explicated at the former level can be articulated at the
level of the philosophy of memory as well.

Before examining this link in further detail, it must be noted that the close affinity
between historiography and memory suggested by Benjamin is far from self-evident.
According to a school of thought that is widespread among contemporary historians, the
two modes of connecting with the past should actually be seen as mutually exclusive such
that historical awareness takes over where memory fails. The French historian Pierre Nora,
e.g., speaks of a “conquest and eradication of memory by history” (Nora 1989:8). He goes
on to suggest that “[m]emory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in
fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. ...
History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of
what is no longer” (ibid.).

In Benjamin’s conceptual scheme, the concept of memory most directly associated
with the position of historical materialism is Eingedenken. As has been specified in my
Introduction, this is a neologism indicating a conceptual innovation analogous to that

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46 Countless other examples could be mentioned of authors registering (in their own
name or otherwise) a mutually exclusive relationship between memory and history. Suffice
Patrick Hutton observes as a point of departure for his comprehensive survey of twentieth
century intersections of history and memory that “[h]istorians have come late to such
discussions [of issues concerning oral tradition, representation, commemoration, and other
forms of collective memory], but their participation is becoming more prominent” (Hutton
1993:1).
undertaken by Benjamin with respect to the concept of history. Without intending to preempt a closer examination of Eingedenken in the following chapters, it may be suggested at the present juncture that all of the main features of Benjamin’s rethinking of temporality apply to this concept of memory too. Like “historical materialism,” Eingedenken builds on a premise of temporal discontinuity, it supplies “a unique experience of the past,” an experience of time in the sense of Jetztzeit, and it spontaneously involves the type of constructive principle - juxtaposing disparate, seemingly incompatible temporal moments - that the historian seeks to emulate. It is in this light telling that Benjamin explicitly characterizes the dialectical image of the past as an involuntary memory-image (GS I:1243). Indeed, many of the basic Benjaminian theorems in the philosophy of history are actually more easily intelligible when associated with personal memory than when presented as principles of formal historiography. This is true, e.g., of Benjamin’s ideas concerning a double inversion of the relation of priority between past and present. Eingedenken is defined as a type of memory which involves a firm rootedness in the present (cf. the “primacy of the political”), yet it is at the same time characterized by a radical commitment to the past. Expressed in the language of Habermas, Eingedenken is the rescuing faculty. As a concept of memory that clearly belongs on the side of theology, it is identifiable as the weak messianic power with which we have been endowed and to which past generations have a claim; and as such, it is part and parcel of the secret force that historical materialism enlists.

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47 How Eingedenken more specifically functions as a “weak messianic power” will be taken up in further detail in chapters 4 - 6 below.
In analogy with the nexus between historical materialism and Eingedenken, Benjamin also recognizes various concepts of memory that belong on the side of historicism.\textsuperscript{48} In a preparatory note to the Theses, e.g., he makes reference to a \textit{voluntary memory} ("wilkürliche Erinnerung" - implying, of course, an opposition to the Proustian "mémoire involontaire") which takes as its object, not the dialectical image but rather strings of events reconstructed as process (Verlauf; GS I:1243). This parallels (and is perhaps integral to) the version of universal history that reconstructs history as progress, and it may be assumed that the version of historicism that seeks to reconstruct history objectively, "the way it really was," is likewise associated by certain "past-minded" modes of remembrance. Generally speaking, historicist memory may be understood to treat all moments of the past indifferently, as inertly available, and to have a pacifying or numbing effect on the present - much like the Nietzschean "Es war."\textsuperscript{49} Its concept, however, is

\textsuperscript{48} It should be noted in this connection that certain concepts of memory employed by Benjamin, such as the memory of the storyteller or for that matter the memory associated with traditional rituals and ceremonies (GS I:611, III.:159), are neither immediately identifiable as Eingedenken nor are they outright historicist. Rather, on my interpretation, they belong to a different regime of historical awareness (and are matched by different modes of historiography, e.g. that of the chronicler; GS II:451f., III.:95), namely one which predates the social developments associated with urban modernity, yet it is important that Benjamin seeks to retain certain aspects of such traditional memory concepts in his own conceptualization of Eingedenken.

\textsuperscript{49} To invoke Nietzsche in this context, as Benjamin himself does before thesis 12 of \textit{On the Concept of History} (GS I:700, III.:260), points to a further theme which will prove central to the conceptualization of Eingedenken. This is the ambiguous status of the will in the context of modernity. Although it is possible to detect certain convergences, the tone of the two authors' writing on this topic is very different in that Benjamin responds to the social experience of a decenitring of subjectivity not by hypostatizing a strong will but rather but surreptitiously asserting weakness and by conceptualizing Eingedenken, paradoxically, as a form of involuntary practice.
nowhere developed by Benjamin in nearly the same detail as the concept of Eingedenken. In fact, Benjamin is usually inclined to emphasize the aspect of forgetting, the infidelity and disconnectedness with the past, which is also invariably a characteristic of historicist memory. Thus, while the entire range of neutralizing memory that I have hinted at in the Preamble to this study are plausible candidates for historicist memory in Benjamin’s sense, they would need to be more closely identified as such. In order to avoid simplifying the field of tension in which Benjamin’s reconceptualization of memory intervenes, it is not advisable to settle for a crude version of historicist memory as a foil for the conceptualization of Eingedenken. To the contrary, it may be assumed that the stronger the opposition, as it were, the more viable the concept of Eingedenken.

This brings me back to the opposition discussed in the section above between Benjamin’s philosophy of history and the key Hegelian premises which I have claimed it both recalls and subverts. In accordance with the basic maxim of a parallelism between historiography and the philosophy of memory, one finds that this opposition too can be articulated in terms of conflicting memory concepts. The relevant Hegelian concept of memory is Erinnerung, in particular as contained in the Phenomenology of Spirit. Even if this is not made explicit by Habermas, Erinnerung relates to ideology critique in much the same manner that Eingedenken relates to Benjamin’s strategy of a rescuing critique. Just as Eingedenken is identifiable as the rescuing faculty, so Erinnerung functions as the faculty of dialectical mediation, and in this capacity it may be expected to figure as an integral aspect of any strategy of consciousness-raising. I take it to be important to examine the conceptual opposition between Eingedenken and Erinnerung carefully in its own right, i.e.
not simply to assimilate it to the opposition between historical materialism and historicism without prior examination. Is the Hegelian concept of Erinnerung in fact historicist? And is it viable in a contemporary context? Does it, as seems to be indicated by Habermas and Tiedemann, point to a concept of practice that is more sober and politically prudent than Benjamin's notion of Eingedenken, or is Eingedenken rather a necessary corrective to Erinnerung in the context of modernity?

These are some of the central questions that will be revisited in the following chapters. Underlying all of them is the presumption that although Benjamin does not articulate himself directly with reference to Hegel, the contrast is central and well-suited to bring out the specific characteristics of Benjamin's philosophy of memory. If his claim to having accomplished a "Copernican turn" in the philosophy of memory and history (it is interesting to note that Benjamin uses memory and history interchangeably precisely in the passages invoking a conceptual revolution; compare GS V:1057 and GS V:1058) is to be substantiated, then the basic Hegelian concept of Erinnerung may be selected to serve as a critical reference point. In the next chapter, I make an "excursus" to Hegel, subjecting the concept of Erinnerung as operative in the Phenomenology of Spirit to examination in its own right.
Chapter 2

Excursus to Hegel’s concept of Erinnerung

Erinnerung, which he [Hegel] occasionally writes Erinnerung, calls to mind not only a particular faculty or power of spirit but the method, the fundamental way, of all things on, above, and below the Earth - the way of interiorization. (Krell 1990:205)

Concepts of memory occupy a ubiquitous position in the Hegelian system. In the Encyclopedia section on “subjective spirit” under the sub-heading of “psychology,” the topic of memory is given substantive treatment turning on a distinction between two types of memory, Erinnerung and Gedächtnis. The latter category, Gedächtnis, generally denotes a form of memory that is integral to the very process of thinking and which verges on the purely mechanical. Erinnerung, to the contrary, despite being presented in the section on

\[\text{In a seminal essay titled The Pit and the Pyramid, Derrida has elaborated the significance of this type of memory for Hegel’s theory of signs (Derrida 1982). Following this, Krell presents a detailed exegesis of the role of Gedächtnis and its relation to Erinnerung in Hegel’s thinking (Krell 1990:221ff.).}\]
subjective spirit as the first in the triad leading up to Gedächtnis and thus in a certain sense subordinate to the latter, plays a central role in virtually all other parts of the system as well, as, e.g., in the logic, philosophy of history, philosophy of right - even in the philosophy of nature. The key to understanding this apparent paradox, as pointed out by Krell, lies in recognizing that Erinnerung is not to be understood (primarily) as a basic mental function or operation of the intellect that may be activated or deactivated at will. In Hegel's usage Erinnerung rather has the connotation of a methodological measure in pursuit of freedom and truth, a processual function that is closely related to what it means to think and live philosophically. Krell suggests that Erinnerung is the "fundamental way of all things on, above, and below the Earth" - a more precise way of rendering the same point would be to say that it is a central moment of the very figure of dialectical mediation that underpins Hegel's entire philosophical and scientific project.\(^{51}\)

The significance of Erinnerung in relation to dialectical method has to do with how we construe oppositions - a theme identified as pivotal to Benjamin's thinking as well. A standard scenario of Hegelian dialectics is one in which a given standpoint or insight is asserted but comes to find itself in opposition to another that would appear to flatly deny or negate it. Natural consciousness takes such oppositions to be absolute, irreconcilable, and

\(^{51}\) Compare Verene on Erinnerung in the *Phenomenology*: "Hegel employs the term here in a sense quite different from his use of it in other places, where he regards recollection as a particular moment of intelligence in his account of the psychology of the theoretical mind (e.g., *Philosophische Propädeutik* (1809/11), secs. 135-44 and *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1830), secs. 452-60). His senses of recollection in these places, for example, are similar to what Aristotle discusses in his short treatise on memory and remembering in the *Parva naturalia*, that is, senses of recollection that are now well-known. But in the *Phenomenology* Hegel uses *Erinnerung* in a unique sense crucial to his whole philosophy" (Verene 1985:2f.).
unresolvable except through the abstract negation of one side or by appeal to a higher instance of authority, a "tertium quid" external to the situation at hand, which on Hegel's account merely sets in motion an infinite regress. What drives the process of dialectical mediation, to the contrary, is the insight that each side of the conflict - provided it is properly construed - is a necessary aspect of the unfolding of truth. Whereas each party in the abstract opposition is characterized by an attempt to externally impose its will on the other, a dialectical resolution involves the recognition of self in the other and other in the self; in other words, a recognition that the opposition at hand is internal rather than external.

This is Er-innerung: a reappropriation of what is in fact integral to the self but initially presents itself as alien to the self. The prefix "Er-" at the same time indicates an intensification of the inwardizing moment. Re-membering in this sense, the inwardizing of the other, shatters the initial self-certainty of either one-sided shape of spirit, but it also prepares the way for the given opposition to be overcome in such a manner that what has been overcome has been retained (taken up, sublated, aufgehoben). The Hegelian concept of Aufhebung indicates precisely this, the cumulative preservation of the essential content manifesting itself at any given stage of a dialectical process. In the course of any actual historical development, Aufhebung always occurs implicitly, i.e. unbeknownst to the actual historical agents. It can therefore only be grasped after the fact ("nachträglich," to employ a

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52 The English verb "to re-member" carries some of the same connotations as Erinnerung but lacks the implication of an inwardizing motion, which in the scheme of Hegelian thought serves as an important counterpart to the centrifugal force of dialectical process whereby the subject must continually externalize itself in order to come to know itself. The latter motif will be taken up below in connection with a review of the function of Erinnerung in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit.
Freudian notion that also resonates strongly with Benjamin’s thinking) and it is the task of speculative philosophy, accordingly, to represent (darstellen) the same dialectical process in such a manner that the implicit content is rendered explicit, i.e. is reappropriated by consciousness.\(^5\) It is in keeping with considerations along these lines, I presume, that Krell is able to state with reference to Hegel that “[i]t is the very existence and essence of ‘Philosophy’ ... to remember” (Krell 1990:211).

**Erinnerung in the *Phenomenology of Spirit***

How this more specifically plays itself out, and how Erinnerung in Hegel’s articulation presents us with one of the most remarkable expressions of the trope of historical memory, is nowhere better illustrated than in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.\(^4\) As I shall endeavour to demonstrate, this is a book *of* memory and *about* memory.\(^5\) To judge by

\(^5\) On this interpretation, Aufhebung (in the order of history) is the moment of recollection in the realm of objective spirit corresponding to Erinnerung in the realm of subjective spirit. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, one finds mention of a “recollected in-itself, ready for conversion into being-for-self” (Hegel 1986:33, §29). As will be further elaborated below, this dual determination of remembrance as both subjective and objective is crucial to Hegel’s philosophy of memory and may, from a certain angle, be seen to constitute the very ground of compatibility between mind and the world.

\(^4\) References to Hegel’s text are provided both to the standard Suhrkamp Werke edition and to the paragraph number which makes them immediately identifiable in the current English translations. Citations are generally adopted from A. V. Miller’s 1977 translation but are occasionally tacitly modified.

\(^5\) One of the few authors who has made this a central focus of Hegel scholarship is Donald Phillip Verene in *Hegel’s Recollection: a study of the images in the Phenomenology of Spirit*. Verene states bluntly that “Erinnerung is the master key to the Phenomenology. Hegel’s work is a colossus of systematic memory” (1985:3). Verene’s central argument, as
the explicit attention paid to the topic of memory in the text of the *Phenomenology*.

However, this is not immediately apparent. Aside from the occasional scattered remark on a particular point involving memory (e.g. in the section on *The Revealed Religion*, Hegel 1986:548, §753), the concept of Erinnerung only comes up in two places, namely at the very beginning and at the very end; in other words, in the Preface and in the concluding paragraph (ibid.:590f., §808) of the entire text.

There is within the scheme of the *Phenomenology* an obvious reason for the episodic treatment of the category of Erinnerung, despite its central importance. This is that it pertains, in the rich sense developed by Hegel, at the level of *absolute knowing*, which is the shape of spirit in which Hegel’s study culminates and which in turn marks the standpoint from which the Preface is written. For our present purposes, however, the central point is that Hegel’s discussion of Erinnerung frames the entire study. It is central to the understanding, not so much of any particular section or passage but of what the overall

far as I can ascertain, is that conceptual thinking in Hegel never comes free of its dependence on image, despite what the philosopher himself might seem to suggest. Begriff and *Bild* remain inextricably connected, and memory constitutes their common ground.

56 I believe that one can find indication of many different concepts of memory in Hegel’s text. Two cases in point would be the forgetfulness of natural consciousness (Hegel 1986:90, §109) and the commitment to a memory of the dead on part of the female side of the spirit of the ethical world, exemplified by Antigone’s obligation to give her brother a proper burial (cf. chapter VI). The concept of Gedächtnis as a mechanical form of memory, similarly, has its phenomenological counterpart in the “unhappy consciousness” (chapter IV), the central mode of cognition of which is to learn by rote. Erinnerung, in this light, is to be understood as Hegel’s concept of memory corresponding to the level of absolute knowing, but in principle it ought to be possible to specify a distinct concept of memory pertaining to each stage of phenomenological development, and even if most of these are not elaborated by Hegel, one can probably find many pointers in the *Phenomenology*. The present study, however, is not the place to undertake such a comprehensive analysis.
The few statements that Hegel does make on Erinnerung therefore have to be read in conjunction with an overview of the intention and structure of the work.\footnote{It must be kept in mind that Hegel himself expresses serious doubts about trying to summarize the project without actually carrying it through (Hegel 1986:11ff., §1 ff.). Nevertheless, his own Preface is devoted to precisely this for the simple reason that no reader can be expected to follow his exposition without a fairly clear grasp of its underlying presuppositions and a sense of what is to come. Hegel’s argument is that whatever presuppositions are made by way of introduction are subsequently derived, and thus justified, in the course of the exposition itself. Ultimately, therefore, the nature of the project is fully intelligible only at the point of its completion. For our present purposes this in-built circularity of the argument is of no concern; our intention is neither to evaluate nor substantiate the structure of Hegel’s exposition (Darstellung) but simply to glean from the Preface an indication of how it sets in motion a grand-scale reappropriation and interiorization of the accumulated experience of humanity in accordance with the concept of Erinnerung.}

Project of the \textit{Phenomenology} is about. The few statements that Hegel does make on Erinnerung therefore have to be read in conjunction with an overview of the intention and structure of the work.\footnote{Interestingly, the designation \textit{Science of the Experience of Consciousness} (Wissenschaft der Erfahrung des Bewusstseyns) was printed on an internal title page in the first edition of Hegel’s work indicating that this was conceived as only the first part of a greater project called the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, which in turn formed the initial part of a work titled \textit{System of Science}. Even if Hegel later gave up the ambition of integrating his \textit{Phenomenology} into a more comprehensive system of science, he maintained the view that it serves as a propaedeutic to science.}

Etymologically, the title \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit} indicates that the work is devoted to the \textit{science of how spirit appears} or \textit{manifests itself}. Elsewhere Hegel characterizes this same endeavour as “the science of knowing in the sphere of appearance” (“die Wissenschaft des erscheinenden Wissens;” ibid.: 591, §808), or “the science of the experience of consciousness” (“die Wissenschaft der Erfahrung, die das Bewusstsein macht /des Bewusstseins;” ibid.:36 /ibid.:80, §88).\footnote{Interestingly, the designation \textit{Science of the Experience of Consciousness} (Wissenschaft der Erfahrung des Bewusstseyns) was printed on an internal title page in the first edition of Hegel’s work indicating that this was conceived as only the first part of a greater project called the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, which in turn formed the initial part of a work titled \textit{System of Science}. Even if Hegel later gave up the ambition of integrating his \textit{Phenomenology} into a more comprehensive system of science, he maintained the view that it serves as a propaedeutic to science.} The work has multiple dimensions, but its main purpose, and the one which will be most closely examined below, is that of a \textit{propaedeutic} - a carefully structured didactic programme grooming the reader for...
philosophy and science, which is to say raising the individual mind to the standpoint of universal consciousness.

In §17 Hegel states the overriding aim of his project in terms of a formula that subsequently continues to serve as a reference point for measuring how far the phenomenological exposition has progressed. He proposes that "everything turns on grasping the True [the Absolute], not only as Substance, but equally as Subject" (ibid.:22f.). Underlying this formula is the conviction that the Absolute should not be conceived as a static, self-contained existence, timeless and always already fully developed - be this conceived after the model of a transcendent Being or in accordance with the Spinozist notion of God as Substance immanent to the material world. Rather, Hegel envisages the Absolute as Spirit, a living entity, something which empties itself into time and gradually unfolds in the course of world history, Being in a perennial state of becoming. In the course of this unfolding, spirit assumes many different manifestations, which Hegel calls its shapes (Gestalten). Each shape taken by itself is only a partial and indeed one-sided manifestation of spirit, yet all are integral to the whole that constitutes the True.

In essence, Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit is the structured presentation of the entire gallery of spirit's manifold shapes. It is a record of the accumulated experience of humanity in the form of a dialectical progression of oppositions that historically were articulated over a period of several thousand years, in different parts of the "civilized" world, and in diverse realms of spirit (including art, science, politics, religion, and philosophy). Hegel's presentation, however, is not organized according to historical chronology. Instead it is structured according to a certain inner logic progressing from an
absolute immediacy of being in the world (sense-certainty) to a state of complete reflexivity (absolute knowing), which marks the point of spirit attaining full consciousness of itself.

The ability to gradually develop each moment of spirit (the absolute, truth) in such a manner that what has been worked through and left behind is also seen to be retained (aufgehoben) is the accomplishment of speculative philosophy. It is one thing for history to slowly manifest the essential determinations of spirit in diverse artistic, scientific, social, political and religious developments - behind the backs of the main historical agents, as it were - but it is quite something else for these various essential determinations of spirit to be recognized as such and for the process of their unfolding to be comprehended as a rational process. Expressed in Hegelian terminology, what is contained implicitly, in-itself (an-sich), in the matter at hand must also become conscious, for-us (für-uns), and through our mediation self-conscious, for-itself (für-sich). In the scheme of the Phenomenology of Spirit, this amounts to spirit consciously taking possession of its own prior experience, i.e. re-collecting its own scattered moments, re-membering the externalized aspects of itself that in the course of world history manifested themselves as something other, something alien to it. According to the Preface,

Spirit ... is just this movement of becoming other to itself, i.e. becoming an object to itself, and of suspending this otherness. And experience is the name we give to just this movement, in which the immediate, the unexperienced [being] ... becomes alienated from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation, and is only then revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth, just as it then has become a property of consciousness also. (ibid.:38f., §36)

In the following paragraph, this dual dialectical movement of alienation and return to self, which is based on a construal of oppositions as inner, is related to the project of the
Phenomenology as a whole:

what seems to be happening outside of it [Spirit], to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and Substance shows itself to be essentially Subject. When it has shown this completely, Spirit has made its existence identical with its essence ... and the abstract element of immediacy, and of the separation of knowing and truth, is overcome. Being is then absolutely mediated ... With this, the Phenomenology of Spirit is concluded. (ibid.:39, §37)

In light of this anticipatory project statement, it is quite obvious that the Phenomenology of Spirit is envisaged as a work of Erinnerung. Throughout, Erinnerung constitutes the positive moment of dialectical mediation facilitating a gradual return of spirit to itself from its state of alienation. Looking now to the sections of the Preface that contain explicit mention of memory, we find that the few comments that Hegel offers are consistent with this interpretation, even if they do little to reinforce the central importance of Erinnerung.

In §28 Hegel relates Erinnerung to the formative character-building process that in German is known as Bildung. I take this link to be central to the philosophy of memory and propose to examine it more closely below. In the present context, however, Hegel merely points to it by equating Erinnerung with the content of what has already been comprehended by spirit. This occurs in a casual remark invoking the image of a scholar who has long since mastered a certain subject-matter but pauses for a moment to refresh his memory and once again make his earlier learning present. The scholar, in Hegel’s phrase, with ease “recalls the recollection” of the earlier stages of his Bildung (“er ruft die Erinnerung derselben zurück,” ibid.:32). Hegel’s intention here is to propose that

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59 - used as a substantive rather than a verbal noun, i.e. indicating a body of memory rather than the faculty.
latecomers to history can take possession of what has earlier been accomplished by spirit with a similar ease, relatively speaking, i.e. when viewed in comparison with the enormous effort it once took “men of mature mind” to attain a certain insight. History has already remembered for us, now we must repeat the effort in the realm of subjective spirit - hence the peculiar reduplication of the function of memory in Hegel’s key phrase.

In §29 the distinction between a memory of objective and subjective spirit (compare footnote 53 above) is made fully explicit, and the convergence of the two is identified as an aim of the phenomenological project. Expressed differently, it is the fact of objective memory being ripe for a transformation into subjective memory that accounts for the unique historical possibility of spirit attaining self-consciousness in Hegel’s own age. Invoking “the enormous labour of world-history, in which it [the world-spirit] embodied in each shape as much of its entire content as that shape was capable of holding,” Hegel submits that “all this has already been implicitly (an sich) accomplished; the content is already the actuality reduced to a possibility ... It is no longer existence in the form of being-in-itself ... but now is the recollected in-itself, ready for conversion into being-for-self” (ibid.:33f., emphasis in the original).

In §47 Hegel touches upon Erinnerung for a third time, now in connection with a clarification of the notion of philosophical truth. His concern here is to reinforce the conception of truth as a process that can be viewed both from the vantage point of its continuous unfolding, in which case it resembles a “Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk,” (ibid.:46) and from the point of view of the abiding determinations of spirit that distinguish themselves along the way. The latter is the perspective of
Erinnerung, which, interestingly, is linked with a notion of judgement rejecting what is transitory (verschwindend) and retaining what is essential. What Hegel further emphasizes in the current passage is that this discriminating perspective is not arbitrarily adopted but arises out of the process of dialectical mediation itself. The capacity for Erinnerung, in other words, is immanent to spirit unfolding itself in history, immanent to the Absolute revealing itself to be Subject as well as Substance:

In the whole of this movement, seen as a state of repose, what distinguishes itself therein [the essential], and gives itself particular existence, is preserved as something that recollects itself [ein solches, das sich erinnert], whose existence is self-knowledge, and whose self-knowledge is just as immediately existence" (ibid.:46f., §47).\textsuperscript{50}

Turning now to the final chapter, indeed the final paragraph of Hegel’s exposition, §808, we find that the theme of memory is taken up again, and this time its significance is made fully explicit. Here a shape of spirit emerges for the first time that no longer breaks new ground, as it were, that does not add to the experience of consciousness, but rather gathers in and takes possession of what is already there. This is a shape of spirit the essential determination of which is its capacity to remember:

As its fulfilment [the fulfilment of the Self] consists in perfectly knowing what it is, in knowing its substance, this knowing is its withdrawal into itself in which it abandons its outer existence and gives its existential shape over to recollection [Erinnerung]. (ibid.:590, §808)

\textsuperscript{50} One should note that Hegel here begins to develop the concept of the phenomenological subject (cf. below), determined by its capacity to remember. At the moment of dialectical completion, this will reveal itself to be identical to the phenomenological object, world spirit.
With this, the project of the *Phenomenology* is completed. The "something that recollects itself" (ibid.:47, §47) immanent to spirit all along has now finally attained concrete form, recollection has thereby explicitly become a determination of the Absolute, and Substance has actually, and not just in principle, revealed itself to be Subject. In the process, spirit has attained full self-consciousness and has thereby realized its concept. Having carried through the entire process of dialectical mediation, Hegel is now in a position to look back and affirm the central role of Erinnerung all along:

The goal, Absolute Knowing, or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, has for its path the recollection [Erinnerung] of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm. (ibid.:591, §808)

I have already remarked on the deliberate (benign?) circularity of Hegel’s argument.

Nowhere is this more obvious that in the final paragraph where the exposition comes full circle, fulfils the agenda outlined in the *Preface*, justifies the presuppositions initially made about the nature of truth, and puts a name to the cognitive process that has been going on all along. One might add that while it is Hegel’s stated intention that the conclusion of his work is to mark a transition to the beginning of Science, it also inaugurates the phenomenological endeavour itself. What we have arrived at in §808 is not only the completion of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* but also its beginning, for clearly the shape of spirit that gives itself over to recollection is the first shape within the entire system that

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61 Recall the claim made in §17: “Es kommt nach meiner Einsicht, welche sich nur durch die Darstellung des Systems selbst rechtferigen muß, alles darauf an, das Wahre nicht als Substanz, sondern ebensosehr als Subjekt aufzufassen und ausdrücken” (ibid.:22f., emphasis on the sentence concerning the criterion of legitimation has been added).
could conceivably begin to practice Hegel's science of the experience of consciousness, i.e. go through the development of spirit step by step, organize its countless manifestations according to their dialectical content, facilitate the transitions, and sublate the essential moments. All previous shapes displayed some degree of one-sidedness and would not be able to see beyond the particular opposition they were involved in. A different way of expressing this point would be to say that Hegel's Darstellung is composed from the standpoint of absolute knowing and can only be fully apprehended from that same standpoint - which we do not attain until we have apprehended the work. Within the parameters of Hegel's thought, this is not surprising at all; it would be more strange if the experience of phenomenological learning were external to the system itself.

Even so, there is an important point about memory contained in these observations on the structure of Hegel's exposition. This is that the circularity in the composition reflects a certain - more troublesome - circularity in the function of Erinnerung itself. By its very nature, remembrance indicates a turning in on oneself in the sense of attending to what one already knows. If this were all, the subject of consummate recollection might realize the concept of speculative philosophy but would for all practical purposes be lost to the world. Hegel is acutely aware of this as a potential problem. Immediately after identifying Erinnerung as the central determination of the last shape of spirit, he invokes a graphic and highly disturbing image of the self-sufficiency of the remembering subject:

Thus absorbed in itself, it [the self which gives itself over to remembrance] is sunk in night of its self-consciousness; ... (ibid.:590, §808)

Yet this is not all. Without any further explanation, Hegel directly proceeds to declaring a
final transition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is a step of the dialectical process beyond itself, once again a turning outward, and thus the beginning of an entirely new mode of interaction with the world. The quotation above continues as follows:

... but in that night its vanished outer existence is preserved, and this transformed existence - the former one, but now reborn of the Spirit's knowledge - is the new existence, a new world and a new shape of spirit. (ibid.)

For our present purposes, the critical point is that Hegel in effect makes the claim that Erinnerung has *practical* as well as *theoretical* implications. In order to make sense of this, I propose to follow a thread left hanging earlier and look more closely at the relation between Erinnerung and the notion of *Bildung*, which has no direct translation in English but carries the connotations of a "formative process" or a "process of character-building."

In so doing, my intention is to look beyond the role of Erinnerung strictly within the confines of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to its implications for the fostering of autonomous subjectivity.

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62 In Hegel's treatment of memory in the *Encyclopaedia*, the entire movement of theoretical spirit of which Erinnerung and Gedächtnis form a central part culminates in a derivation of the will (*Encyclopaedia*, §468), which marks a transition to the realm of practical spirit. As noted by Krell, this link between memory and practice appears to be "forgotten" when Hegel treats memory elsewhere in the *Encyclopaedia* (Krell 1990, p.207). Krell himself, however, also fails to examine the connection in his exposition of Erinnerung in the *Phenomenology*, but my argument is that it is essential to the realization of the phenomenological project since this is from the outset oriented towards assisting humanity in taking possession of its "new world" - the world waiting to emerge from the ashes of the French revolution.
Bildung exposition

Like Erinnerung, Bildung is one among a small number of concepts that is sporadically thematized in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but the significance of which far exceeds the formal analysis that Hegel offers of the concept.\(^{63}\) From the point of view of compositional structure, it may be argued that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in many ways resembles a *Bildungsroman*, i.e. a novel depicting the formative process of the subject coming into his or her own. (This works at two levels, incidentally: at the level of the unfolding and self-realization of spirit and at the level of raising the reader to the standpoint of universal consciousness.) For this reason, in setting about to develop the relationship between Erinnerung and the broader function of Bildung, I propose not to restrict myself to what Hegel expressly says about Bildung but primarily to concentrate on the way in which the trope figures in the composition of the *Phenomenology*. I begin with an observation regarding the colloquial usage of the word.

Natural language recognizes two fundamentally different models for what the process of character formation called Bildung is like, and a brief review of these will be helpful for the purpose of clarifying Hegel’s use of the notion. The first model is based on a

\(^{63}\) For English language readers, the analysis of the concept is additionally complicated by the fact that there is no direct English equivalent of Bildung. In Miller’s Hegel translation the word “culture” serves as the standard rendition of “Bildung,” yet this has the unfortunate connotation of depicting Bildung as something static and of giving primacy to what is in reality a secondary, normative sense of the concept (for a particularly misleading instance, see the opening of §4, Hegel 1986:13f.). Occasionally, when the process aspect of Bildung has to be made explicit, Miller employs phrases such as “formative education” (§28, ibid.:32f.) or plainly “education” (§78, ibid.:73). While relatively accurate, this has the drawback of obscuring the direct connection with the use of the concept elsewhere.
Learning through practical experience, immersing oneself in the affairs of the world, taking on great challenges, and coming to know and rely on oneself through this exposure. One of the more dramatic variations on this theme is found in the figure of the adventure seeker who travels to unfamiliar places in order to seek fortune and returns home enriched by experience. Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister captures this model eminently and in many ways stands as the paradigmatic Bildungsroman. The sense of Bildung projected here is characterized by a focus not just on practical accomplishments or failures, but also on the effects these have on the formation of the self. Thus Bildung involves an aspect of self-creation; it is not primarily a question of being molded according to an existing social norm, but rather of mobilizing inner resources through which one is able to express oneself and accomplish something new. Clearly, Bildung in this sense is closely linked with the ideal of attaining autonomy.

The second characteristic model of Bildung is normative and is epitomized by the figure of the pupil being formed through a planned course of studies. In the tradition of the European high bourgeoisie, any process of formal education would be considered a process of Bildung (as opposed to merely a process of developing skills). This interpretation of Bildung displays an important similarity with the one outlined above in so far as the immediate pursuit, in this case acquiring knowledge, is inextricably linked with the broader goal of character-building. The decisive difference between the two models, however, is that the latter form of Bildung occurs essentially through an appropriation of the experience

64 Lukacs describes it as standing aesthetically and historico-philosophically between two types of novels, which he calls the "adventure novel" and the "novel of disillusionment;" Lukacs 1971:132ff.
of others. One might suggest that Bildung always involves a combination of the two moments: experience and re-collection (Erinnerung). What distinguishes the two models of Bildung, then, is that the former tends to accentuate the process of immersing oneself in experience whereas the latter emphasizes the side of Erinnerung.

By the late eighteenth century, the notion of Bildung as an educational ideal had become inextricably linked with a neoclassicist agenda of appropriating the canon of Greek Antiquity. In McCole’s interpretation, this agenda contained an undeniable progressive moment in that it established merit rather than birth as the primary criterion for social access and status. But the neoclassicist ideal of Bildung also displayed in-built tendency to become static and dogmatic, thus increasingly coming “to signify exclusionary standards that served to defend the privileges and rescue the self-image of the educated strata” (McCole 1993:26). Like the bourgeoisie generally, the Bildungsbürgertum thus tended to retreat to a position of conservatism (ibid.:83ff.), and this rendered it a key target of the German Romantic movement. The latter established the necessity, clearly resonating in Hegel’s Phenomenology, of rethinking the notion of Bildung, in part through an expansion of the historical / cultural canon, but in part also by embracing a notion of Bildung based on practical experience.

In Hegel’s usage, the concept of Bildung carries both connotations outlined above. Its primary meaning, which is invoked repeatedly in the Preface and Introduction,65 is the formative process whereby individual spirit is raised to the standpoint of philosophy (Hegel

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65 See, e.g., ibid.:13f., §4; ibid.:31ff., §28; ibid.:36ff., §33; ibid.:63, §68; and ibid.:73, §78.
1986:63, §68) or science (ibid.:73, §78). The same process can also be viewed from the perspective of universal spirit, Hegel observes in §28 (ibid.:31ff.), in which case it denotes a process of substance attaining self-consciousness. In this sense, whether regarded from the side of individual or universal spirit, the ideal of Bildung is equivalent to the overall aim of the Phenomenology. But this picture is somewhat confused by the fact that in the body of Hegel’s text, notably in the transition in chapter VI from “self-alienated spirit” to “spirit that is certain of itself” (“morality”), Bildung tends to be used in a limited sense denoting the one-sided position of (renaissance) spirit once again embracing the world and asserting a profane, knowledge-based criterion of legitimacy in opposition to faith (see especially ibid.:364f., §489-90). This anticipates the positions of “pure insight” and eventually “the enlightenment,” and only in the definitive exposure of the one-sidedness of the latter in the terror of the French Revolution does alienated spirit come into its own. It then “leaves behind the land of Bildung [narrowly defined] and goes over into another land, the land of moral consciousness” (ibid.:362, §486).

Returning now to the question concerning the interplay of the two models of Bildung, the critical point is that they tend to be brought into play in the Phenomenology of Spirit in a distributive fashion such that the moments of experience and recollection are elaborated at different levels of subjectivity. The Goethean model of Bildung as a process of attaining self-realization through practical interaction with the world bears a considerable resemblance to the one-sided pursuit of Bildung described in chapter VI, yet its primary significance in the Hegelian exposition is not to define a particular shape of spirit at the level of individual existence. Rather, it describes the overall process that universal spirit
undergoes (which in and of itself marks a re-integration of the ruptured unity between the individual and the universal). It is on this account that Hegel’s Phenomenology displays characteristics of a novel and is often likened to an extravagantly conceived Bildungsroman relating the story of the fostering of subjectivity at the level of the universal subject. The more conventional model of Bildung, i.e. Bildung as a process of second-hand learning, is easier to associate with a concrete protagonist in the Phenomenology. Presumably some measure of formal education is important to numerous members of Hegel’s gallery of spirits, but the one shape for which this is the essential activity is the shape of spirit that gives itself entirely over to recollection, the shape encountered in the final paragraph.

However, the motif also plays a central role in the course of Hegel’s exposition. As has been indicated earlier, the final shape of spirit is prefigured throughout Hegel’s text in the form of the reader. Ordinarily, one would not include the figure of the reader among the characters of a Bildungsroman, but in our present case it cannot be ignored that the reader struggling to apprehend Hegel’s formidable erudition and to make sense of each conceptual transition undergoes precisely the process of educational development (from a position of immediacy to comprehensive phenomenological insight) that on Hegel’s account epitomizes Bildung. It should further be noted that while never openly addressed, the position of the reader always remains very close to the surface of Hegel’s text, such as when Hegel includes another consciousness with the same insight as himself in the first person plural conceptual construct “für-uns.” In secondary literature on Hegel, it is common to designate the construct of the ideal reader as incorporated within Hegel’s text “the phenomenological observer.” This present / absent character may be described as the
consciousness that at every step along the way has achieved a level of insight corresponding to the stage that Hegel has reached in his dialectical exposition, i.e. the consciousness that is prepared to take each position seriously and relive every conflict and opposition, yet which, unlike the corresponding historical manifestations of spirit, is also capable of making the required dialectical transitions at each step along the way and thus progress to ever higher levels of phenomenological insight. It is, in short, consciousness in a process of reappropriating the experience of spirit.

Having distinguished these two models of Bildung and identified them both in Hegel’s text, what has to be emphasized next is their fundamental complementarity. Strictly speaking, neither model taken by itself accurately captures Hegel’s conception of Bildung and neither is actually capable of standing on its own. Phrased differently, if the two models respectively accentuate experience (Erfahrung) and remembrance (Erinnerung), then the upshot is that neither experience nor remembrance can be viewed as a self-contained process. Each logically presupposes the other and one might go as far as to say that they are mutually constitutive of one another. The same may be said of the two levels of subjectivity, universal and individual subjectivity, in terms of which the two models of Bildung are elaborated. Even if Hegel separates them for compositional purposes, each inherently refers to the other and is only realized through this dialectical interplay. The universal subject accumulates experience in the course of world-history through a progressive Aufhebung of its own essential determinations, but spirit in the abstract cannot attain self-consciousness; for this, it has to await the emergence of a concrete shape of spirit the sole agency of which is to contemplate and remember. Conversely, the individual shape
of spirit which remembers has no essential experience of its own. It is a latecomer to the
scene of world-history. Like Minerva's owl which only takes flight at dusk, and like
philosophy in the words of the Preface to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, Erinnerung always
comes after the fact, which is to say that it presupposes experience, and in case of the final
shape of spirit or the phenomenological observer, this is the experience of another. Thus the
Bildung of the universal subject is completed through the erudition of the individual subject
that remembers, and the Bildung of the latter is invested with content through the agency of
the former. Or the relation could be reversed: individual shapes of spirit undergo
experience, and the remembering subject is universal. The upshot in both cases is that
Bildung proper denotes the dialectical integration of the two moments.

The transition to practice

In light of the general theme of Bildung, we need to return to the question left
hanging earlier concerning the practical implications that Hegel claims for Erinnerung. We
have seen how Hegel's exposition is based on a separation of the subject of experience from
the subject of recollection and how this would appear to reduce the latter to a completely
self-absorbed existence, being "sunk in the night of its self-consciousness." Nonetheless,
Hegel insists that "in that night its vanished outer existence is preserved" (Hegel 1986:590,
§808). How is this? How does the propaedeutic outlined in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*
groom spirit in the sphere not only of theoretical reason but also of practical reason? And
how, more specifically, is the phenomenological subject to emerge from its introspective,
bookish endeavour to once again embrace the world? I believe we can shed light on these questions by attending to the effect Hegel achieves by separating out the two moments of Bildung, i.e. by treating experience and remembrance separately at different levels of subjectivity, and by then once again merging the two. In this merging, so Hegel implies in the conclusion of the *Phenomenology*, a new mode of subjectivity and experience arises.

From the notion of the Absolute comprising both subjective and objective spirit it follows that Erinnerung, in conjunction with being an appropriation of ideational content, also involves a *mediation of the self in relation to the world*. The central idea here is that the rational substance underlying the experience of consciousness is the same that has shaped the external world we inhabit. Both are expressions of Reason unfolding in history. Thus the process that is reconstructed through historical memory - precisely because it exceeds the horizon of individual experience - is a process leading up to and accounting for the social and political determination of the present, and the very act of remembering therefore positions the self in relation to this social context. In this manner Hegel articulates a concept of memory that is radically affirmative. Erinnerung is a form of remembrance that intimately identifies with the past, appropriates the past as constitutive of the present self, and given the close affinity between subjective and objective spirit this also means identifying with the given social formation and institutions that are borne of the same historical development. On this account the last shape of spirit, having completely remembered, is the first concrete being that can truly be said to be *at home in the world*.

In the *Phenomenology*, the theme of being at home or a stranger in the world is first struck when Hegel turns his attention from the various shapes of object consciousness to
self-consciousness. This happens in chapter IV, where the experience of individuation culminates in the emergence of an “unhappy consciousness” leading a peregrine existence on earth and epitomizing the attitude of religious otherworldliness. The rest of Hegel’s exposition consists in seeing spirit out of its state of alienation. In a related connection, the young Lukacs (in a phrase quoted by Benjamin in the essay on The Storyteller; GS II:454, Ill.:99) identifies the novel as the literary form of “transcendental homelessness” (Lukacs 1971:41). If this characterization is extended to the Phenomenology of Spirit, then it is not surprising that the culmination and grand resolution of this philosophical novel should be to once again reconcile the alienated subject with his or her world. There is an implicit sociological dimension in this theme as well, since the experience of alienation, articulated in literature through the medium of the novel, must be regarded as socially and historically generated. While Hegel generally traces it back to Stoicism and the Roman empire, it is an experience that is intensified with the rapid rationalization of social life in the wake of the industrial revolution. This produces what Terdiman (1993) has described as the “memory crisis” of the modern era. In being cast as a means of healing the schism of social and historical alienation, Hegel’s concept of Erinnerung functions in essence as a response to this crisis.

In looking ahead to the upcoming chapters, it will emerge that Benjamin too articulates his philosophy of memory in response to a memory crisis of the nature described here. At the opening of Chapter 3, we will encounter it in the form of what Benjamin calls “an impoverishment of experience.” But I shall argue that the manner in which this theme is developed in Benjamin’s late work problematizes not only the experience of alienation
addressed by Hegel but the Hegelian solution as well. The theme of a transcendental homelessness resonates strongly with the messianic orientation of Benjamin's thinking, and Wohlfarth has convincingly demonstrated that this in many respects retains a triadic structure pushing towards "reunification" (Wohlfarth 1978:148ff.), yet the final moment of Benjamin's triadic scheme remains "obstinately fragmentary" (ibid.:186) - leading, in effect, to a radical rethinking of the very logic of dialectics.

Viewed from a different angle, the notion of memory as a re-collection of experience may be seen as a means of taking possession of and domesticating one's external environment. This is fundamentally the agenda of the enlightenment - both as understood by Hegel himself in chapter VI of the Phenomenology and as conceptualized, e.g., by Horkheimer and Adorno in Dialectic of Enlightenment. But to this observation it must be added that the enlightenment agenda associated with Hegelian Erinnerung exceeds that of the historical enlightenment, which Hegel in his analysis of the terror of the French revolution identifies as one-sided because based on a principle of abstract universality. The domestication of the social environment as facilitated by Erinnerung, to the contrary, builds on a principle of reconciliation with difference: of different social factions with one another, of the present with the past, and of spirit with nature. To Hegel, this is the decisive characteristic of the social formation called Moralität; at the ideational level it is the essential truth of revealed religion, as expounded in chapter VII of the Phenomenology, which is in turn sublated in conceptual terms in chapter VIII in the form of absolute
knowing. Given the principle of comprehensive reconciliation - the ultimate thrust of a positive dialectic - autonomy is not to be understood in the narrow enlightenment sense of blindly imposing one’s will on another or on the world but rather in the sense of being released from all heteronomous determination and thus being in a position to fully actualize one’s capacities. In this manner, the mediation of self in relation to the world functions as a precondition of asserting autonomy.

This is the key premise that carries over into the Marxist notion of ideology critique, as expounded in the previous chapter. Rather than to confirm the actualization of reason in history, ideology critique persistently confronts bourgeois society with its failure to meet its own implicit standards, and in so doing it revives the negative force of Hegelian dialectics as a vehicle of political mobilization. Yet it retains the basic emphasis on mediating anamnestically between subjective and objective spirit and in so doing invests critical theory with immediate or potential (depending on one’s political stance) practical implications. More could be said, of course, about the relationship between theory and practice in the Hegelian Marxist tradition, but this is not the place to do it. Our concern in the present chapter has been to elaborate the basic Hegelian concept of Erinnerung and to connect this with a general configuration of the relation between experience, history, and practice. What will emerge in the following is that Benjamin consistently dismantles this configuration in connection with his conceptualization of Eingedenken.

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66 This transition epitomizes Tiedemann’s claim that theology has already been sublated by the enlightenment. The immanent relation between theology / religious faith and enlightenment thinking is also developed by Hegel at the level of history and politics in the final sections of chapter VI.
Chapter 3

Benjamin’s Phenomenology of Modernity

Gänzliche Illusionslosigkeit über das Zeitalter und dennoch ein rückhaltloses Bekenntnis zu ihm ... 67
(Erfahrung und Armut; GS II:216)

Il faut être absolument moderne
(Rimbaud)

Rethinking experience

No interpretation of Benjamin’s work of the late 1920s and the 1930s can ignore a fundamental tension in his respective allegiances with modernity and tradition. Benjamin was writing at the cusp of European aesthetic modernism and was himself a powerful exponent of modernist sensibilities, yet his essays and prose pieces continue with very few exceptions to echo a certain nostalgia for a lost era. Expressed differently, Benjamin is as keenly aware of the losses and casualties of social modernization as any cultural

67 “To be completely without illusions about one’s age, and yet committed to it without reservation ...”
conservative, but he is equally attuned to the ambiguities inherent in a politics of restoring tradition (fascism, in so far as it exploits the dysphoria of modernity and draws strength from an appeal to the authentic culture of the "Volk," presents the extreme, sobering example). His writing is thus suspended between a rescuing impulse, highlighted by Habermas, and a liquidationist impulse, as emphasized by Tiedemann in the critiques reviewed in Chapter 1. The present chapter is devoted to an exploration of this field of intellectual tension.

As elaborated in Chapter 2, Hegel's speculative philosophy reads directly as a response to the condition of modernity, indeed as a vision of the "project of modernity" in the sense of humanity coming into its own, i.e. rising above its state of natural determination, through an intense rationalization of social processes and fragmented spheres of culture which are in turn to be re-integrated within a comprehensive scheme of institution-building and spiritual Bildung. In so far as it achieves this vision through a reconstruction of universal history teleologically organized as a context of human progress, the Hegelian philosophy of history is clearly to be regarded as historicist from a Benjaminian point of view. Yet it constitutes a richer mode of historicism than examined in Chapter 1. Hegel neither treats the past "the way it really was" as abstract norm, nor does he present historical development as a process that happens with mechanical necessity. In essence, his thinking is not scientistic and the agenda of a comprehensive re-appropriation of experience cannot reasonably be associated with the pacifying, narcotic effect that to Benjamin is the defining trait of historicism. To the contrary, speculative philosophy is conceived as a vehicle of fostering human agency by actualizing the potential of free
subjectivity that is contained in yet stifled by the modern condition. In the Marxist articulation of essentially the same agenda, history is to culminate in humanity becoming the author of its own destiny by taking possession of the formidable productive forces and instruments of social control that have been unleashed yet remain untamed in the bourgeois era.

In this light, a critique of Hegel’s philosophy of history - which has remained topical until the present due to an abiding commitment on the Marxist and post-Marxist left to the “unfinished project of modernity” - has to exceed, if only to supplement, the critique of historicism summarized in Chapter 1. Benjamin rarely addresses Hegel directly, but my general argument is that he implicitly supplies the elements of a critical assessment of the Hegelian - or Hegelian Marxist - project of humanity taking possession of its own history through a sustained analysis of what in contrast to Hegel’s “science of experience” might be called the phenomenology of modernity. By focusing renewed attention on the category of experience (and notably on the inner tension between its two moments which in German are designated Erlebnis and Erfahrung) Benjamin calls into question the underlying premises of Hegelian Erinnerung and by implication the normative pursuit of Bildung and autonomous subjectivity. Thus the fundamental opposition to Hegelian thinking identified at the level of the philosophy of history comes to permeate Benjamin’s thinking at all levels; as will be further elaborated in subsequent chapters, it gives rise to a rethinking of the very concept of dialectics, to the revival of a radically different strand or

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68 As mentioned in footnote 44 above, one does find scattered - generally negative remarks about Hegel in Benjamin’s early correspondence (see, e.g., B:171, Corr.:112f.), but nowhere does he attempt anything remotely resembling a systematic Hegel critique.
mode of theology, and to a profound conceptual innovation in the philosophy of memory.

It must be noted in this connection that the agenda of rethinking the concept of experience reaches all the way back to some of Benjamin's very earliest writings. In *Erfahrung* from 1913, Benjamin takes a firm stance against the doctrinarian experience of "the adult" and "the philistine." This, he contends, signifies nothing but "years of compromise, impoverishment of ideas, and lack of energy" (GS II:54, SW:3). In contrast, the young Benjamin extols the experience of youth, which he also envisions as an experience of spirit (GS II: 56, SW:5) and in fact an experience of something "inexperieenceable" ("unerfahrbare," GS II:55, SW:4). In *On the Program of the Coming Philosophy* from 1918, Benjamin follows up on this theme by introducing the notion of a "higher experience" ("höhere Erfahrung," GS II:160, SW:102) which now is linked inextricably with an appeal to theology. In relation to the author's later position this is significant, for while the early appeal is indicative of the overtly idealist orientation of Benjamin's thinking at this stage, it also provides a premonition of the manner in which "theology" will later be enlisted by the author to complement historical materialism, even while it is "wizened and has to keep out of sight" (GS I:693, Ill.:253, thesis 1). The phrase

69 In *The Politics of Youth: Walter Benjamin's Reading of the Idiot*, Wohlfarth elaborates on a fundamental distinction in Benjamin's early thinking between the stiffened, doctrinarian, socially conformist ethos of projecting oneself as "a pillar" and the fluid, dynamic, self-transcending ethos of forging oneself as "a vessel" of a level of experience exceeding the mundane (Wohlfarth 1992:163f.). The notion of youth is synonymous with the latter. Wohlfarth has no hesitation to extend this opposition into Benjamin's late work and concludes a section of his study by proposing that the "historical materialist" of *On the Concept of History* is "the mature embodiment of 'youth'" (ibid.:165).

70 The notion of theology, in Benjamin's usage, always implies some degree of an affinity with tradition, and even in its contemporary diminished form, it retains the
“higher experience” is launched in 1918 as a corrective not to Hegel but to the critical philosophy of Kant - or perhaps more accurately, to the schools of neo-Kantianism that were dominant in the German academy during the first decades of the twentieth century. Benjamin’s central point is that this school of thought restricts itself to the notion of experience that is operative in the natural sciences, and this he contends is “shallow” ("flach,” GS II:161, SW:103). It is to be overcome, or enriched, by the articulation of a notion of experience proper to metaphysics which, Benjamin proposes, “ties all of experience immediately to the concept of God, through ideas” (GS II:164, SW:105). In the studies of the 1930s addressing the concept of experience one will find that the call for a notion of higher experience in fact stays with Benjamin. But the overtly metaphysical approach to the endeavour is now dropped (or kept out of sight), and Benjamin’s phenomenological intervention is instead cast in terms of a careful reflection upon the experience of modernity.

I begin the chapter with an examination of Benjamin’s notion of an atrophy or impoverishment of experience. Following a review of two key images in terms of which he depicts the phenomenon, I take up a brief discussion of the methodological implications of Benjamin’s analysis, i.e. of treating experience as a central category of the politics of modernity, and in light of this I outline Benjamin’s overall response to the historical developments in question. The key here lies in recognizing the dialectical tension inherent in Benjamin’s seemingly inconsistent diagnosis of modernity as a context both of loss and of liberation (the underlying theme having to do with the manner in which Benjamin connotation of a means of access to what has been lost with the decline of tradition.
construes oppositions). I then turn to a closer investigation of the structure of experience itself, beginning with an examination of the conceptual distinction between the two German words for experience, Erlebnis and Erfahrung. A key to understanding the interplay of these two moments in the context of modernity, to Benjamin, is found in Freud's analysis of the phenomenon of shock. This is particularly interesting in light of our overall theme since it has a direct bearing on the constitution of memory. The impact of the shock experience is elaborated in two consecutive sections. While the first section targets its fundamental structure, predominantly at the level of psychological categories, the second section adds the sociological observation that the contemporary prevalence (virtually normalization) of shock phenomena leads to a general condition of experiential bipolarity which in turn sets the stage for a bifurcation in the concept of memory. Following this diagnosis, which essentially completes the analytical dimension of Benjamin's phenomenology of modernity, I turn to a closer consideration of the strategic position that Benjamin adopts in response to the proclaimed state of cultural impoverishment. This is a position of negotiating ambiguities, paradoxically, by resolutely embracing "poverty." In conclusion of the chapter, I include a brief exegesis of Benjamin's Kafka reading. This is directly related to the dialectics of modernity and tradition in so far as Kafka's main strength, on Benjamin's interpretation, lies in mobilizing the remains of an atrophied tradition in a social context that has ostensibly parted with the latter. Moreover, the Kafka pieces delineate several different concepts of remembrance and forgetting and thereby set the stage for Benjamin's conceptualization of Eingedenken proper.
Benjamin’s theory of an atrophy of experience

Man’s inner concerns do not have their issueless private character by nature. They do so only when he is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of experience. (GS I:610, Ill.:158)

Two images of experience in decline

In the opening passage of his 1939 Baudelaire essay, Benjamin notes that the author of Les Fleurs du Mal addresses himself to readers lacking in will power and the ability to concentrate, “readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties” (GS I:607, Ill.:155). Such readers, Benjamin suggests, share with Baudelaire himself “a change in the structure of their experience” (GS I:608, Ill.:156). This observation strikes the theme of the phenomenology of modernity and points to a development which Benjamin elsewhere describes not simply as a change in the structure of experience but as a destruction, atrophy, or impoverishment of experience, (Zerstörung der Erfahrung, Verkümmerung der Erfahrung, Erfahrungsarmut, etc.). This theme is absolutely central to Benjamin’s conception of modernity and sets the stage for his interventions in the philosophy of memory both in terms of establishing the parameters of an adequate notion of memory and by rendering certain current concepts of memory (including, possibly, the Hegelian concept of Erinnerung) effectively obsolete.

As a first step towards clarifying Benjamin’s notion of an atrophy of experience, it is instructive to examine a pair of evocative images, similar to that of Baudelaire’s distracted readers, that is found in the 1933 essay Experience and Poverty (“Erfahrung und
Armut”), unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime. The first image is that of an old man who summons his sons to his deathbed. He lets them know that there is a treasure buried in his field; if only the sons dig, it will be theirs. And so the sons dig and dig without any sign of the treasure, but during harvest their crop is abundant and the sons now understand that what their father had conveyed to them was the accumulated experience of a lifetime. His “treasure” was not to be obtained gratuitously and all at once but would come with the seasons as the result of hard labour. Benjamin presents this as a familiar story, anonymous and ubiquitous, somewhere contained in “our textbooks.” The experience it conveys is that of popular wisdom which is handed down “like a ring from generation to generation.” endlessly impressed on the young, and bolstered by the authority of age. “Wo ist das alles hin?,” asks Benjamin - what has come of all this? Who can any longer give advice based on experience? (GS II:214).

Benjamin’s second image is in a sense the reverse of the first, or, rather, its contemporary counterpart. It is that of soldiers returning from the trenches of World War I having grown silent - “not richer, but poorer in communicable experience.” In a post-World War II context this motif remains topical: survivors don’t talk. To Benjamin their silence reveals an inability to assimilate extreme experiences, which, he suggests, in the given situation is not surprising: “For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by hunger, moral experience by those in power” (ibid.). Readers familiar with Benjamin’s work will notice that this material is recycled with only a slight variation in the opening passages of Benjamin’s 1936 essay on Leskov, The Storyteller. Whereas the
second image is reproduced almost verbatim, the first would appear to have been dropped, yet it is retained in content in so far as the very focus of the essay is the vanishing of the figure of the storyteller who, like the dying father, indicates a loss of "something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest of our possessions ... the ability to exchange experiences" (GS II:439, III.:83).

In my interpretation these two images capture two distinct, albeit closely related, aspects of Benjamin's conception of the impoverishment of experience. The first aspect has to do with a decline in the ability to extract from life experiences an essential core and render this relevant, to oneself and others, in different settings. What is at stake, broadly speaking, is the very capacity for integrated experience that Hegel sought to preserve at a higher level of social complexity, and in the face of the dysphoria of modernity, through a comprehensive scheme of world-historical Bildung. Benjamin broaches the trope in a simpler form, yet thereby manages to convey a powerful expression of its contemporary shortcomings. The father in his textbook story had no reason to doubt that the accumulated wisdom of his own lifetime, combined with that of his forefathers, would be of use to his sons. Nor did he have any trouble articulating himself. Like the figure of the storyteller, he is in full possession of the ability "to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns" (GS II:443, III.:87), and by the same token, he is capable of providing counsel for others (GS II:442, III.:86). But in the social context within which Benjamin writes, the figure of the storyteller is vanishing: The sons no longer have any use for their father's advice and the transmission of accumulated experience from generation to generation is grinding to a halt. In relation to our overall theme, a crucial question concerns
the extent to which this dynamic also affects Hegelian Bildung and the mnemonic structures supporting it.

If we turn now to Benjamin's second key image, that of the soldiers returning from the battlefields of the great war, we find that it too involves a silencing but this time communication fails because it is confronted with something for which there is no precedence in tradition, something which exceeds the horizon of experience and resists assimilation. Thus, whereas the first image indicated a pattern of inner erosion, the second addresses the theme of a change in the fundamental structure of experience, as surmised by Benjamin in connection with his reading of Baudelaire. In essence, this has to do with the increasing prevalence in the modern era of a particular type of experience which paradoxically defies and even undermines experience itself. In this sense, the second aspect of the impoverishment of experience explains the first, or at least contributes to an understanding of how it is that experience erodes. To clarify the mechanism by which this happens is a central focus of Benjamin's analysis of experience, and the theme will be taken up in further detail below. First, however, it will be opportune pause for a moment to further reflect upon some of the broader implications of the figure of decline that is invoked in these pages.

*Question of sociological scope and materialist method*

When it comes to determining the significance of the images in terms of which Benjamin presents his theory of an atrophy of experience, several points of uncertainty present themselves: What social structures and modes of experience are affected? Where
does the proclaimed impoverishment leave modern subjectivity? And underlying this, what kind of an explanatory model does Benjamin bring into play? It will be found that these questions are closely interrelated.

In response to the question concerning the precise sociological reference of the concept of experience that has come under attack, I see two possible lines of interpretation. The answer immediately suggesting itself is that the disruption invoked by Benjamin affects traditional social structures. On this account, the notion of an atrophy of experience presents itself as basically synonymous with what Benjamin has elsewhere called "a tremendous shattering of tradition" (GS I:477, III.:221). This phrase evokes obvious associations to Weber and may be understood to imply an uprooting of stable social structures and religious cosmologies, kinship-based organization in face-to-face communities, etc., through an intense rationalization of social processes. Benjamin himself often associates tradition with craftsmanship thus indicating, on the one hand, a pronounced quality of repetitiveness in work processes and in social life yet, on the other hand, a capacity to see such processes through to completion and to attain a sense of fulfilment.

There is an unmistakable romantic slant to this notion of tradition. It carries the connotations of what the young Lukacs has called "integrated civilizations" (Lukacs 1971 [1920]) and what Pierre Nora in a more recent context has described as "environments of memory" ("milieux de mémoire;" Nora 1989). The reference to memory here indicates something static. Within the general interpretive framework in question, memory is perceived to be essentially a public function, typically supported by religious liturgy and ritual practice, which serves to periodically assimilate prosaic events to atemporal
paradigms, thereby continually eliminating history (Mircea Eliade 1974, Yerushalmi 1982:6 et passim). At various junctures in his late writing, Benjamin deploys such a notion of traditional memory. It is the defining trait of the figure of the storyteller (see, e.g., A. Benjamin 1989:123), and in On Some Motifs in Baudelaire one finds mention of an integrated social context closely resembling the romantic construct. Interestingly, Benjamin associates this with a state in which experience was still intact and, like Nora, he attributes the dimension of social cohesion that has in the meantime been lost to the workings of traditional memory:

Where there is experience [Erfahrung] in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The cults with their ceremony, their festivals ... kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. (GS 1:611, III.:159)

Prima facie, this would appear to be the context of the trope of a confident communication of paternal advice that is invoked by Benjamin in Experience and Poverty. The notion of an atrophy of experience would then be tantamount to a decline of traditional memory (e.g. as a function of the development of technology and the rationalization of work processes, etc.), and the modern condition as a whole would, in keeping with a pessimistic view that has been in widespread currency since the early romantics, figure essentially as a context of loss. The central political challenge of the age would accordingly consist in somehow or other facilitating a restoration of integrated experience.

While there are elements of Benjamin’s prose that seem to support such an interpretation, it can clearly not stand alone. The more dominant voice in his late authorship indicates a firm commitment to modernity as a context of liberation. One might therefore be
inclined to view his writing on modernity and tradition as an indecisive oscillation between conflicting impulses. But it is also possible, I submit, to give the theory of an atrophy of experience a different spin. A more challenging, less naïve framework of social analysis which has also been in widespread currency since the early nineteenth century recognizes the increased complexity arising from the rationalization of social structures and the advances of science not only as loss but also as progress. On this account any option of a simple return must furthermore be regarded as blocked due to a sober recognition of the historical developments in question being irreversible. The critical historical challenge therefore consists in at one and the same time compensating for the losses of social modernization and realizing the latent potential generated by this process. This means recapturing some form of integrated experience, but at a higher level of complexity. An early expression of this agenda is found in Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education of Man* (Schiller 1967 [1795]); another version with which Benjamin was intimately familiar is found in Lukacs’ *Theory of the Novel*, but the quintessential expression of the motif in question is

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Wolin seems to adopt this view: “the Leskov study reveals ... a sudden and dramatic change of heart on Benjamin’s part concerning the issue of modern technological methods versus traditional forms of life. The exuberant acceptance of the process whereby traditional aesthetic genres are sacrificed to the all-encompassing onslaught of rationalization, characteristic of the ‘Work of Art’ essay, a process credited with opening up tremendous, heretofore untapped possibilities for the political employment of art, is a sentiment totally absent from ‘The Storyteller.’ In the Leskov essay, Benjamin has come round to the diametrically opposite assessment of this trend: he now recognizes that rather than leading automatically to the progressive transformation of aesthetic forms (as the naïve materialist view would have it), the contemporary rationalization of aesthetic experience signifies the irreparable destruction of a vital part of our cultural heritage, the loss of unrenewable structures of meaning and experience whose claim to reconciliation and happiness would necessarily fall due to any and every future emancipatory movement worthy of our trust” (Wolin 1994:224f.).
contained in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Philosophy of History*. These works thoroughly sublate the romantic impulse but in a revised mode which is oriented not towards the restoration of traditional memory but rather towards the mobilization of a new, profoundly historical mode of memory - as has been elaborated in *Chapter 2*. Contrary to traditional memory, the Hegelian Erinnerung is capable of accommodating the unique quality of individual events by continually integrating experience as process. Much in the spirit of Lukacs, Benjamin associates this form of memory with the literary form of the novel and contrasts it with the short-lived memory of earlier epic forms, notably storytelling, which are regarded as genres of the past (GS II:453f., III.97f.).

The crucial point that I wish to make here is that this reconstituted notion of experience forms the true target of Benjamin's theory of impoverishment. What is effectively being called into question is not primarily the impulse to restore traditional forms of social and cultural cohesion (which materialists will at any rate insist have become objectively outmoded) but rather the dynamic paradigm of Bildung expounded by Hegel (and many of his contemporaries, including Schiller) and adopted in a revised form by Hegelian Marxism. Because this model of integrated experience is itself conceived in response to the problem of discontinuity and fragmentation associated with the undermining of traditional social structures, it marks a more challenging target of analytical intervention and seriously raises the stakes of a critique of modernity. If the operative concept of Erfahrung in this construct can be shown, like tradition, to be subject to a "decline in value," then Benjamin's phenomenology of modernity in effect calls into question the entire edifice of Hegel's philosophy of memory and the concept of practice
associated with it. This would have profound consequences for the articulation of a revolutionary agenda and more broadly for any concept of history as a medium of the realization of freedom. Lukacs' notion of class-consciousness, e.g., is modeled on a Hegelian concept of Bildung in so far as it is a matter of the proletariat overcoming its own state of alienation and rising to the objective historical challenge at hand so as to forge itself as the author of its own history.

The main evidence in support of this line of interpretation is the observation that the true focus of Benjamin's analysis of modernity is not, in fact, the disruption of pre-modern social structures. Quite the contrary, it is the emergence of new sensibilities and structures of perception, and along with this new standards of expertise and legitimacy. Thus, while the decline in the art of storytelling indicates a shattering of tradition, Benjamin is careful to relate this development in the literary sphere to the rise of new technologies and patterns of communication - most notably the transmission of knowledge in the form of fragmented bits of information in the news media:

If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs. ... Every morning brings us news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. ... by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. (GS II:444f., Ill.:89)

In this manner, the dynamic of an undermining of experience is presented as internal to the process of social modernization. It concerns the impact of technology upon the lifeworld and in a broader sense upon the contemporary conditions of experience - what I have sought to capture in the phrase the phenomenology of modernity. Throughout Benjamin's opus one finds repeated variations at different levels of social analysis of this general theme. In the
work place and economic sphere indications of an impoverishment of experience are most immediately apparent in a decline of craftsmanship (to which storytelling, on Benjamin’s account, ultimately belongs). With the massive processes of urbanization and industrialization in the 18th and 19th centuries, large segments of the workforce are limited to unskilled labour, and this is characterized precisely by not depending on experience and not involving memory. Like gambling, Benjamin notes, the routine operations of mechanized production in the factory hall or at the assembly line tend to be self-contained, i.e. always to begin anew and never to permit a sense of completion. “The unskilled worker is the one most deeply degraded by the drill of the machines. His work has been sealed off from experience [Erfahrung]; practice counts for nothing there” (GS I:632, Ill.:176). In the realm of consumption, fashion signals a pace similar to that of the information conveyed by the news media, and like the latter, it maintains a constant appearance of novelty while imposing what Benjamin unmaskas as a tyranny of the same.

In the aesthetic sphere, similarly, Benjamin sees evidence of a fundamental change in the structure of experience in the rise of a paradigm of aesthetic judgement which requires no formal expertise and which abandons reflexivity. Baudelaire is an exponent of this, but the theme is most thoroughly elaborated in the “technology essay,” The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, where the author documents the rise of art forms that are, on the one hand, removed from a traditional, ritualistic context and which, on the other hand, require something entirely new of the listener, reader, or viewer in terms of reception. Benjamin’s primary example of this development is the case of film, which along with photography is the first art form intrinsically dependent on mechanical
reproduction and intended for a mass audience: "Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed” (ibid.).

Overall, the analytical focus of Benjamin’s phenomenology is the emergence of new forms of subjectivity and sociability. Key to this development is the increasing mediation of experience by technology and the rapid rise of a mass culture. When it comes to assessing the development, the author is adamant that it is not to be regarded “merely as a ‘symptom of decay’” - as if cultural processes could be treated as self-contained and evaluated in a vacuum - but rather as “a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces” (GS II:442, Ill.:87). Thus, far from projecting a sense of romantic longing, Benjamin ostensibly casts his analysis of experience in strict materialist terms.

In the “Frankfurt” tradition of Benjamin reception (as was already noted in Chapter 1), the analysis of the dialectics of superstructure and material base has generally been regarded as the weak point of Benjamin’s sociological scholarship. Adorno, who was Benjamin’s most loyal but in some ways also most severe critic, thus persistently confronted his friend with the charge of a lack of dialectical mediation. This objection comes to a point in Adorno’s outright dismissal of Benjamin’s original Baudelaire study on the grounds of its inherent positivism, i.e. the charge that it offers “a wide-eyed presentation

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72 It should be noted that a similar development is evident in some modernist visual and lyric art works. Benjamin notes: “Before a painting of Arp’s or a poem by August Stramm it is impossible to take time for contemplation and evaluation as one would before a canvas of Derain’s or a poem by Rilke. In the decline of middle-class society, contemplation became a school for asocial behaviour” (GS I:502, Ill.:238).
of mere facts” and gives “to conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a ‘materialistic’ twist by relating them, without mediation and perhaps even casually, to corresponding features of the base.”\textsuperscript{73} Both Habermas and Tiedemann articulate variations of the same basic charge. I shall for the time being leave the question open as to whether this line of criticism is damaging. What can be said with certainty is that rather than responding on conventional materialist grounds by sharpening his analysis of the dialectics of base and superstructure, Benjamin launches a rethinking of the central materialist tenets, including the notion of dialectics itself. The degree to which this is successful has to be taken up in connection with an overall assessment of Benjamin’s intervention in philosophy of history and the rethinking of the practice that I have suggested is integral to his re-conceptualization of memory. But it may nevertheless be suggested already at the present juncture that there might well be something gained by concentrating directly on the phenomenological consequences of technological developments. As observed by Habermas in connection with the thesis of a “loss of semantic potentials” and the possibility of a “meaningless emancipation,” the category of experience becomes highly politically charged in the modern era precisely because it has become precarious as a consequence of material historical developments. And in this light Benjamin may in fact be particularly well positioned to broach crucial aspects of political consciousness-formation in the twentieth century.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{73} Letter dated Nov. 10, 1938 (Corr.:581f.). It must be noted that Adorno is not, of course, calling for compliance with a rigid materialist explanatory model; what he wanted from Benjamin was \textit{more} dialectics and more theology, not less; see e.g. letter dated March 18, 1936 (Adorno 1995:173). Compare Wolin 1994:198ff.}
The dialectics of loss and liberation

A further feature of Benjamin's analysis of experience that unmistakably orients it toward a contemporary political context has to do with the overall stance that he adopts vis-a-vis the proclaimed decline of experience. Off-setting any inclination to mourn loss and long for recuperation, the dominant voice in Benjamin's prose maintains the exact opposite, namely that the decline in question is not a loss but a liberation. If modernity is to be defined as a context of impoverishment, then Benjamin's strategic response is to embrace poverty. As we shall examine more closely at the end of this chapter, this basic outlook leads Benjamin in much of his work of the 1930s to abandon the nostalgic tone altogether and instead begin to articulate a vision of modernity as a condition of possibility, while at the same time a context of extreme danger.74

Overall, however, the key to Benjamin's phenomenology of modernity is that it is necessary to insist on both moments. The atrophy of experience, to Benjamin, is both loss and liberation. This dual diagnosis is indicative of a broader pattern of negotiating ambiguity: in addition to the fundamental ambiguity concerning the assessment of loss and the status of experience, also the impact of technology, e.g., is thoroughly ambiguous in Benjamin's assessment. This is true, in fact, of all of the key categories structuring the analysis of modernity, and one therefore finds that Benjamin's thinking in this area tends to unfold in terms of an exploration of polarized contradictions in which each side is unstable

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74 It may be argued that this too accounts for a decisive difference between Benjamin and Adorno, for much as the latter developed his critical thinking in direct dialogue with aesthetic modernism, he was never able to reconcile himself with Benjamin's radical affirmation of mass culture and of the impact of technology upon the current mode of experience.
and subject to paradoxical shifts and inversions.\textsuperscript{75} The operative oppositions invariably tend to be porous, yet they delineate the field of tension in which critical thinking is given to intervene and at the same time flag certain approaches to the phenomenology of modernity as one-sided and insufficient.

The modern condition conceived overwhelmingly as loss gives rise to interventions that are historicist, both in terms of treating an idealized past as norm and in terms of projecting an interpretation of experience as cumulative continuity, an ever-expanding stockpile of life lessons. There is an unmistakable element of denial in such strategies (as it particularly apparent in the historicist reassurance that the past is indiscriminately accessible) - a denial which does not overcome loss but rather cements it. The dialectical response, by contrast, is that the trope of loss itself has to be thought more radically, namely as a historical given by which the option of return has been effectively blocked. This does not preclude mourning, but it forces thinking to take critical stock of the concomitant potentials for liberation.

The one-sided position emphasizing only liberation, however, naturally leads to a celebration of the isolated moment. In this case, the dismantling of traditional structures is regarded as a condition of sheer possibility coming to expression in the uprooted modern subject’s pursuit of life intensity. Benjamin confronts several manifestations of this pursuit. Surrealism marks one, but equally important is the philosophical movement associated with

\textsuperscript{75} - which is what was registered without clear comprehension by Wolin in the passage cited in footnote 71 above. John McCole has nicely captured this pattern of inversions and shifting positions by identifying “the antinomies of tradition” as an abiding analytical focus of Benjamin’s scholarship (McCole 1993). Compare Wohlfarth 1994:168.
the notion of vitalism, in German “Lebensphilosophie,” which flourished around the turn of the twentieth century. Its defining feature is a commitment to the pursuit of genuine experience and moments of authentic being in pointed contrast to the leveling and trivialization of modern experience. This general outlook has itself been expressed in numerous different variations, but common to all is that they display a disturbing affinity with fascism in their attempt to merge a quest for authenticity, culture, soul, etc., with a fascination with technology and social control. Benjamin associates the vitalist position with thinkers as divergent as Dilthey, Bergson, Jung, Klages, and Jünger (the latter presenting the most pointed example of the fundamental ambiguity of the intellectual trend, cf. GS III:238ff.) and in his essay on The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction also with the futurist hypostatization of war and destruction (GS I:506f., III:241f.).

We shall return to Benjamin’s critique of Lebensphilosophie at the end of the chapter in connection with a closer review of the strategic position that Benjamin adopts vis-à-vis the phenomenology of modernity. Of primary interest in our present context is that vitalism has its proto-fascist quality in common with the historicist longing for a return to some form of traditional authenticity, which for its part is stigmatized by its characteristic

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76 In a section of Reactionary Modernism elaborating Benjamin’s response to Lebensphilosophie, Herf explains the connection between the irrationalist celebration of the national soul and the glorification of technological destruction: “For Weimar’s right-wing nationalists, the violence of the battlefields, the efficiency and power of tanks and ships, and the explosions of grenades were the external expressions of inner impulses towards ‘life.’ Rather than offer political, economic, or social analyses of events, they could be explained away as being merely expressions of some deep, mysterious, eternal, and irresistible force, some Ding an sich immune to rational description” (Herf 1984:34).
valorization of blood and earth. What renders this observation particularly uncomfortable and therefore also analytically challenging to Benjamin is that his own pursuit of a concept of "higher experience" displays a certain affinity with the basic impulses underlying both one-sided aberrations. To prevent potential misreadings and firmly set himself apart from the range of reactionary responses to the experience of modernity, he therefore explicitly takes it upon himself in the Work of Art essay to develop a conceptual framework that is "completely useless for the purposes of Fascism" (GS I:473; III.218). This may be taken as a basic maxim guiding Benjamin's entire intervention in the phenomenology of modernity. In reference to our present line of inquiry it manifests itself in the form of a commitment to rethink the notion of experience beyond the two unsatisfactory alternatives outlined above.

*Erlebnis and Erfahrung*

As a prerequisite for appreciating the delicate balance that Benjamin strikes in his analysis of experience, it is necessary to draw a conceptual distinction that is clearly marked in German but buried and all but inaudible in English. The German language distinguishes between two existential phenomena or events, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, which both translate into English as *experience* - a fact which renders the current translations virtually unintelligible at key points. Implicitly, the distinction has already been

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77 When it comes to translating these key concepts into English, the common practice appears to be to employ the term "experience" indiscriminately, thus masking the distinction. Whenever the distinction is explicitly emphasized in the original text and thus indispensable, "experience" is always reserved for Erfahrung and the translator scrambles for some alternative word or phrase to denote "Erlebnis." Thus, e.g., in On Some Motifs in Baudelaire one finds the latter rendered "a certain hour of one's life" (GS I:615, Ill.:163). While this practice may succeed in conveying the basic sense of the passage in question, it
presupposed in the section above, but before proceeding any further it is necessary to bring it out into the open.

"Erlebnis" literally denotes a "something (being) lived," i.e. a lived moment, an event or set of events, often with the connotation of this being something out of the ordinary and making a strong impression. The root of "Erfahrung," by comparison, is the verb "fahren," to travel, and the noun "Erfahrung" therefore etymologically indicates a "having traveled," the fact of having been exposed to many things (many Erlebnisse) and having learned and retained something from these exposures. "Er-fahrung" also connotes an element of destabilization, for the implicit reference to a journey invariably suggests a moment of danger. Yet as portrayed in the classical Bildungsroman, this is ideally character-building; by the experience of alienation and exposure to danger one develops the ability to understand and handle new situations. Thus, while the notion of Erlebnis carries a connotation of immediacy, Erfahrung always involves an aspect of reflexivity. Another characteristic difference is that whereas Erlebnisse are short lived and pass, Erfahrung has the drawback of once again obfuscating the key conceptual distinction. Since a critical aspect of Benjamin's thought consists in thematizing and problematizing the relation between Erlebnisse and Erfahrung, this is unfortunate. Even if much confusion can be avoided by employing the German terms directly whenever there is a possibility of doubt, we still stand in need of a terminology capable of capturing the conceptual distinction. To supply this, I propose in all cases to retain the root "experience," which is in any event natural, but then consistently to emphasize the distinction, which is in fact latent in English, between the type of experience which is always singular: experience as an uncountable noun (Erfahrung), and the type of experience which we suffer in the plural: passing experiences (Erlebnisse). To paraphrase the connection indicated above, one might suggest that many experiences gradually generate experience. No doubt this practice has to be pointed out to the reader, but then it by and large works, especially if one stipulates that Erlebnis in the singular requires an article ("an" or "the"). Nevertheless, there are still some cases where the distinction will remain invisible; in such cases I see no alternative but to provide the German equivalent as well - as do most of Benjamin's translators.
invariably implies an element of continuity in the life of the mind and must in some manner be interpreted as cumulative.

With these general connotations in mind, Mc Cole defines Erfahrung as "an accumulating stock of integrated, 'lived' experiences" (McCole 1993:272.). But this may be cutting too close to a historicist interpretation of experience. In Benjamin's manner of thinking, it must not be assumed that continuity is synonymous with sequential enumeration unfolding in homogeneous empty time ("telling the sequence of events like the beads on a rosary;" GS I:704, III:263, thesis A). Nor must Erlebnisse be assumed to integrate seamlessly with Erfahrung, and the latter should not be taken as a foregone conclusion. To the contrary, significant experiences are hard to come by - much as the past on Benjamin's account is only exceptionally accessible. And the moment of danger which we have identified as integral to the concept of Erfahrung is radicalized in Benjamin's thinking. In Hegel's philosophical rendition of the Bildungsroman an element of existential uncertainty is recognized as integral to the generation of experience, but in the overall scheme of dialectical mediation this moment of self-alienation merely prepares the way for a safe return to self. In Benjamin's materialist historiography, to the contrary, the "traveler" has no certainty of a safe return. Thus the stakes involved in reclaiming experience are significantly raised and this, in turn, leads Benjamin to configure the past as a site of indeterminacy and urgent intervention.

78 Andrew Benjamin too comes close to uncritically projecting a historicist interpretation of Erfahrung when he observes that: "The time of Erlebnis differs fundamentally from the time of Erfahrung. The first involves the temporality of the unique and fragmented moment while the second involves the sequential continuity within tradition" (A. Benjamin 1989:132).
The next crucial step in elucidating the mutual standing of Erlebnis and Erfahrung is to establish that the two concepts must on any interpretation be recognized as closely related. Experience in the sense of Erfahrung logically presupposes Erlebnisse as its "raw material," so to speak. But there is, conversely, also an important sense in which Erlebnisse presuppose Erfahrung. Even if the former carry a connotation of immediacy, they are invariably modified, even enriched, by previous experience. Thus body experience, e.g., generally presupposes a training of the sensorium, as Benjamin himself keenly observes on several occasions. 79 Needless to say, these are very general observations. To provide a more specific account of Benjamin's interpretation of the relationship between the two moments of experience is, in a certain sense, the overriding aim of the entire chapter; at the present juncture, what is of primary interest is that the fact of registering the conceptual interdependence of Erlebnis and Erfahrung places us in a position to articulate more clearly what is involved in Benjamin's notion of an impoverishment of experience.

Off hand, the notions of atrophy and impoverishment affect experience in the sense of Erfahrung, as is directly evident by the German terminology: Erfahrungsarmut, Verkümmerung der Erfahrung, etc. But what is fundamentally at stake is in fact a severing of the two moments. This, indeed, is what is conveyed in both of the two images with which we began our inquiry. The plight of the dying father, the storybook character hypothetically transposed to a present-day setting, is that his accumulated Erfahrung no longer speaks to contemporary experience. The Erlebnisse of his sons are neither informed

79 In its classical conception Bildung also implies a capacity for great Erlebnisse, and in this light it is not surprising that modernity is widely perceived by its critics to signify a trivialization of experience in the sense of Erlebnis.
nor modified by the wisdom of his lifetime. His Erfahrung, therefore, is not theirs.

Phenomenologically speaking, this schism is widely experienced as a disruption of continuity and meaning in social life. Interestingly, Benjamin's paradigm of this development seems to be the rampant economic inflation in Germany of the 1920s (which ruined his own family): experience, in this rendition (which cuts disturbingly close to a historicist concept of experience, thereby demonstrating its untenability), may be conceived as accumulated capital, but like the latter it is no longer a "secure possession," no longer "inalienable." To the contrary, it has undergone "a decline in market value" ("ist im Kurse gefallen;" GS II:214).

Benjamin's second key image, in comparison, shifts the emphasis to a different level of the same phenomenological disruption, namely to a certain type of Erlebnis, like that of the soldiers in the trenches of World War I, which can neither be assimilated to existing Erfahrung nor lends itself to the generation of new Erfahrung. Here too what is fundamentally at stake is a severing of the connection between the two moments. Without the living connection to Erlebnis, Erfahrung declines; thus the cryptical notion of a type of an experience that undermines experience. Key to Benjamin's phenomenology of modernity is that this undermining happens to the detriment of both moments of experience, for Erlebnis too suffers from losing its connection with Erfahrung. Viewed from one angle it becomes shallow. This is the perception commonly expressed in the depiction of modernity as a context of trivialization. But approached from a different angle, it is equally significant that Erlebnisse that do not return to Erfahrung remain undigested and therefore expose the subject to a "deep" level of heteronomous determination. By
drawing attention to the example of unspeakable war trauma, Benjamin makes it abundantly clear that such a dimension of heteronomous determination is integral to his analysis of modernity and thus key to developing a concept of impoverishment that is also a condition of possibility. The experience of modernity has to be understood, in summary, both in terms of a pattern of inflation and trivialization and in terms of a pattern of traumatization and heteronomy. The central conceptual challenge consists in articulating a concept of experience that can answer to both of these traits.

Neither one-sided assessment of the condition of modernity outlined in the previous section measures up to this challenge. To adopt a purely nostalgic approach to the experience of loss in no way forges a viable connection between Erlebnis and Erfahrung. It merely registers their disruption and re-asserts a call for integration without accomplishing this at the level of actual experience. The historicist position, in other words, follows a formula of reified Erfahrung that neglects the necessary relation of tension in which Erfahrung always has to stand with Erlebnis. Experience then becomes hollow and stale. This position is not challenging to Benjamin’s thinking. The vitalist alternative, however, seems at first sight more congenial to Benjamin in that instead of merely lamenting the separation of Erfahrung and Erlebnis, it squarely confronts the separation with a view to overcoming it. But it fails to actually accomplish this, for the leitmotif of Lebensphilosophie, on Benjamin’s analysis, is to seek to constitute Erlebnis directly as Erfahrung. The outcome, therefore, is a reified notion of Erlebnis which too is one-sided and undialectical and which effectively functions either as a form of escapism or as an outright glorification of destruction (as is thematized in Benjamin’s Jünger reception; cf.

With this, the main coordinates of Benjamin’s own approach to rethinking experience are in place. The decisive step by which he undertakes simultaneously to push beyond both the restorationist nostalgia for integrated Erfahrung and the vitalist impulse to reify Erlebnis consists in clarifying the nature of the class of Erlebnisse which - in the realms of modern warfare, the economy, communication technology, the politics of power, etc. (GS II:439, Ill.:84) - defy assimilation to experience. To this end, Benjamin looks to psychoanalytic theory for an elucidation of the nature of the experience of shock.  

On the impact of shock

In his 1939 Baudelaire study, Benjamin returns to the theme of an impoverishment of experience and seeks to take his analysis a step further through an examination of the phenomenon of shock. This is of direct relevance to our present discussion in so far as the shock experience may be characterized precisely as an Erlebnis which defies assimilation to Erfahrung. Benjamin adopts the notion of shock from psychoanalytic theory and looks to Freud for a clarification of its basic structure, yet he prepares the reader that he is going to

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80 For a somewhat similar, somewhat different discussion of the cleavage between Erlebnis and Erfahrung in Benjamin’s phenomenology of modernity, see A. Benjamin 1989:129ff. My own primary objections to Andrew Benjamin’s interpretation concern his lack of a clear sense of the regressive dimension in any agenda (be it traditional or modern) of seeking to constitute Erlebnis immediately as Erfahrung and, secondly, his failure to recognize (cf. ibid.:133) that Benjamin’s rearticulation of experience as a unity of the two moments (mediated by memory) assumes the form of an Erfahrung based on the Erlebnis of shock. These are both points which in my present exposition will be further developed in the following.
employ Freud’s technical term somewhat loosely and that he will apply elements of Freud’s analysis “in situations far removed from those which Freud had in mind when he wrote” (GS I:612, Ill.:160). It is not altogether clear what he means by this. One indication is that he makes a point of emphasizing a “historical determination of experience” (“geschichtliche Determinierung der Erfahrung.” GS I:608, Ill.:157) and sets himself to clarify “the functioning of psychic mechanisms under present-day conditions” (GS I:614, Ill.:161).

Another potentially relevant consideration is that Benjamin will eventually probe the possibility of employing psychological categories at the level of collective subjectivity. Both of these traits might be taken to contrast with Freud’s apparent preoccupation with anthropological constants at the level of individual subjectivity. In fact Freud himself extends his thinking in the directions indicated here, but this is another matter; it may in the end well be that the opposition between anthropological constants and a historical determination of experience is too strongly stated.\(^1\) Overall Benjamin’s Freud reception is very sporadic; his thinking repeatedly intersects core psychoanalytical categories (e.g. the

\(^1\) Another possible interpretation of what Benjamin might have been driving at when expressly setting his use of psychoanalytical categories apart from Freud is suggested by Wohlfarth in a somewhat different context. In response to an allusion to Anna Freud made by Adorno in a comment on Benjamin’s *Work of Art* essay, Wohlfarth observes that “Benjamin’s critics regularly reintroduce psychological categories precisely at those points where he himself was looking for ways out of bourgeois interiority” (Wohlfarth 1994:182, n.9). Perhaps it could be demonstrated that Benjamin consistently appropriates Freudian concepts and tropes with a view to exploding bourgeois interiority from within. While I shall not explicitly pursue this line of interpretation, I believe it is generally consistent with my reconstruction of the concept and politics of Eingedenken. Overall, however, I am not concerned in the present context to attempt a detailed reconstruction of Benjamin’s Freud interpretation, nor do I intend to assess its tenability. Rather, I take Benjamin’s references to Freud more or less at face value and regard them primarily as a stimulus for tropes that became central to his own scheme of thought. For a more sustained comparison of Benjamin and Freud, see Comay 1993.
concepts of mourning and melancholia, the concept of Nachträglichkeit, etc.), but in most cases he seems to develop his analysis of the mechanisms in question independently of Freud and with a distinctly different spin. The concept of shock, however, marks a central point of direct intersection.

Freud's analysis of the phenomenon of shock in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* turns on the hypothesis of an *inverse* correlation between memory and consciousness. The basic idea is that consciousness is *not* to be viewed primarily as a receptor of stimuli or a repository of memory but rather as a protective shield, a buffer against highly charged stimuli that threaten to penetrate the psychical system with excessive force. Mental alertness is fundamentally a defensive posture even as far as the basic perceptive apparatus itself is concerned, and in keeping with this view becoming conscious of phenomena in the external environment is a way of diffusing, and hence neutralizing, the potentially destructive energy with which the latter confront the subject. In Freud's own words, as cited by Benjamin, "the excitatory process does not leave behind a permanent change in its elements, but expires, as it were, in the phenomenon of becoming conscious" (GS I:612, Ill.:160). Thus, paradoxically, there is a relation of mutual exclusivity between memory and consciousness: "becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace are processes incompatible with each other within one and the same system" (ibid.). Consciousness as such receives no memory traces whatever but rather "comes into being in the site of a

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82 It is characteristic that Freud here describes psychological functions in terms of a thermodynamic metaphor (consistent with his early ambition to provide a neurological account of our entire psychological apparatus); for all intents and purposes Benjamin seems to go along with this basic metaphor.
memory trace” (ibid.).

In *A Note upon the Mystic Writing-Pad*, where the theory of consciousness and memory first advanced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is briefly revisited and elaborated, Freud introduces the additional hypothesis of a rapid alteration between “[receiving] perceptions which are accompanied by consciousness and [passing] the excitation on to the unconscious mnemonic systems” (Freud 1984:433). This would account for our general sense of consciousness and memory being more or less co-extensive under normal circumstances - what is retained in memory was once perceived by consciousness, and vice versa. Without making reference to Freud’s later text, Benjamin introduces the same basic theory, or at least indicates a similar conception of the mental apparatus, by invoking a notion of “the registry of conscious memory” (“der Registratur der bewuBten Erinnerung,” GS I:614, Ill.:162). His primary concern, however, is not with the harmonious integration of memory and consciousness. Rather it is with the original focus of Freud’s investigation, namely the impact of stimuli that confront the perceptive system “off-guard,” as it were, i.e. in a state of relaxation and unpreparedness, or which encounter it with sufficient force to break through its protective shield. “The threat from these energies is one of shocks,” Benjamin notes, and shock impressions which forcefully penetrate the protective shield of consciousness to the underlying layers of the mental system behave very differently from impressions that are integrated into the registry of conscious memory. They are characterized by not being mastered by consciousness at the time of the event and may in fact not be registered consciously at all. Nevertheless, they have a deep impact on our psychic system and are, in their own obscure fashion, retained in memory (much as
inscriptions on "the mystic writing pad" remain impressed on the bottom waxen slate even when they are no longer legible on the protective cellophane surface). According to Freud, memory fragments are actually "often most powerful and most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness" (GS I:612f., III.:160).

Given the portrayal of consciousness as a defense system, this paradoxical observation is explained by the assumption that shock impressions enter the underlying mnemonic structures directly, yet to this picture it must be added that they also enter a separate registry of memory, namely one that is not accessible at will and not transparent to consciousness.

Complementing the notion of a registry of conscious memory, this might be designated "the registry of unconscious memory." Needless to say, this two-tier model of the structure of memory bears a close affinity to Proust's distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory, which, as will be elaborated in the next chapter, is decisive for Benjamin's own conceptualization of Eingedenken.

The point of immediate concern in our present context is that the model of perception elaborated here in rather obvious ways contributes to an explanation of the schism between Erlebnis and Erfahrung that was identified above as the key factor underlying the progressive decline of experience. Shock factors that are successfully parried by consciousness expire. According to the Freudian interpretation, they leave no (deep) memory traces behind and do therefore not benefit Erfahrung. Benjamin elaborates this point: "That the shock is thus cushioned, parried by consciousness, would lend the incident that occasions it the character of an experience of the moment in the strict sense" ("den Charakter des Erlebnisses im prägnanten Sinn," GS I:614, III.:162). Shock factors that do
break through the protective shield - i.e. actual traumatic shocks, perceptual and emotional invasions of the subject for which the psychic apparatus was not prepared - are also severed from Erfahrung in the sense in which it is ordinarily understood. Even if they do leave a deep impression on memory, this is not accessible to ordinary consciousness. Thus they too remain restricted to the realm of Erlebnis; they cannot be assimilated to existing Erfahrung and cannot generate new Erfahrung. Hence the inability of the modern subject to generate experience from a range of momentous experiences analogous to those of Benjamin’s World War I soldiers returning silent from the trenches. And hence Benjamin’s own resolve to rethink the structure of experience “under present-day conditions.”

The central importance of this analysis in relation to the model of integrated experience developed in Chapter 2 is that shock experiences are to be understood as Erlebnisse which defy being mastered by consciousness; they cannot be attributed an essential significance and are therefore not amenable to Erinnerung in the Hegelian sense. They are both inaccessible and indigestible, as it were. However, even if the remembering subject is incapable of identifying with or “owning” experiences of shock, s/he cannot disregard them either. Despite their amorphous character and elusive nature, they affect us intimately. This double bind potentially disrupts the project of classical Bildung and along with this, as is the primary preoccupation of Freud, the capacity for rational subjectivity and autonomous practice. Freud describes this behavioral disturbance as a pattern of deferred reaction - Nachträglichkeit\(^\text{33}\) - which is characterized by a disjunction of cause and effect.

\(^{33}\) This is translated “iterative afterwork” by Andrew Benjamin (1994:229) and “after-the-fact-effect” by David Carroll in his Foreword to Heidegger and the “jews”, Lyotard 1990:xxvi). In a recent Laplanche translation, the evocative phrase “afterwardness”
such that the initial traumatic cause is without any noticeable response or effect and subsequent effects occur without any apparent cause. Expressed differently, the experience of shock sets in motion a pattern of heteronomous determination which psychotherapy aims at breaking. Remembrance, as Benjamin reads Freud, is (when properly understood) a way of accessing the original unconscious impression and can be operationalized for the purposes of retroactively mastering shocks (GS I:613f., Ill.:161). In so far as his main concern is with understanding the contemporary structure of experience, Benjamin himself does not explicitly attribute a therapeutic dimension to remembrance, but when turning to a closer examination of his concept of Eingedenken, we shall have to inquire whether he nevertheless invests this with a related function.

**Experiential bipolarity**

In order to complete the analysis of how disruptive Erlebnisse affect the structure of experience, it is necessary to add a further premise that may be common to Benjamin and Freud, yet which reveals a difference in emphasis. Hitherto, I have tended to portray the phenomenon of shock as something momentous and exceptional, events that occur rarely and have a profound impact on the victim's life. This is of course consistent with the psychoanalytic emphasis on the pathogenic effect of traumatic shocks. But although a similar trope of psychotrauma is implicit in the image of soldiers who are spiritually

is employed in conjunction with the French "après-coup" (Laplanche 1999), but in the dictionary on *The Language of Psycho-analysis* co-authored by Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis (1988), the joint authors still employ the more conventional "deferred action."
wounded by the experience of the Great War, this is not Benjamin’s primary focus. Instead he links the Freudian model of the perception system and his analysis of the impact of traumatic shocks with the sociological observation that the experience of shock is an *entirely common occurrence in contemporary society.* This leads him to downplay the exceptional nature of shocks and present them as quotidian, not particularly dramatic events which, however, form a constituent feature of the phenomenology of modernity. Thus, while his immediate purpose in examining these aspects of psychoanalytical theory is to clarify the social and experiential context of Baudelaire’s poetry, it is telling that Benjamin concludes his review of Freud by posing the question: “how lyric poetry can have as its basis an experience [Erfahrung] for which the shock experience [Chockerlebnis] has become the norm” (GS I:614, Ill.:162, my emphasis).

In order to illustrate the extent to which the shock experience has become norm, Benjamin links it up with a broad range of fundamental features of modern existence. This adds a sociological dimension to his theory of experience - not in the form of dialectical mediation, as would be requested by his Marxist critics, but rather in his characteristic fashion of loosely establishing a series of correspondences between developments in the superstructure and in the material base. Despite its theoretical shortcomings, what this “explanatory approach” does accomplish is to alert us to surprising affinities between apparently unconnected realms and to furnish us with a set of evocative images of contemporary living. Thus, the constant exposure to shock is presented first and foremost as

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84 This too may well be consistent with Freud’s own social analysis (witness, e.g., *Civilization and its Discontents*), but an examination of this question falls beyond the scope of the present study.
a defining feature of mass society, particularly of urban society, where the mere act of moving through traffic "involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions" (GS I:630, III.:175). But it is also a feature of work at the assembly line where the body has to be rigorously disciplined to subordinate itself to the repetitive, abrupt movements of the machine. Gambling, interestingly, displays exactly the same shock-like array of sudden gestures in that "there can be no game without the quick movement of the hand by which the stake is put down or a card is picked up. The jolt in the movement of a machine is like the so-called coup in a game of chance" (GS I:633, III.:177). At the level of new technology, Benjamin suggests that "[t]he invention of the match around the middle of the nineteenth century brought forth a number of innovations which have one thing in common: one abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps" (GS I:630, III.:174f.). He goes on to note that similar developments are taking place in many areas, the telephone being a case in point, but "[o]f the countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing, and the like, the 'snapshot' of the photographer has had the greatest consequences. A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were" (ibid.). Advertisement marks an example of an optic manifestation of the shock experience, thus adding to the haptic impact described above. The fact that this can be effectively exploited by commercial interests is indicative of a critical development, merely intimated by Benjamin, whereby shock phenomena shift from being experienced as an imposition to being experienced as stimuli that we positively crave. This development culminates in the medium of film, where "perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle" (ibid.).
From a conventional historical materialist point of view, Benjamin's observations must undoubtedly be seen - at best - as an indication of the scope of the shock experience rather than an explanation of how material developments shape our consciousness. But the central point is that the prevalence and quotidian nature of the phenomenon of shock is decisive for the manner in which it, on Benjamin's account, affects the basic structure of experience. It leads to a certain duality of experience which corresponds to the duality of memory implied by Freud's theory of perception. To Benjamin, this state of experiential bipolarity is epitomized by Baudelaire's oscillation between spleen and idéal: on the one hand a quotidian experience with no particular substance and, on the other hand, a moment of intensity that transcends mere unidimensional diachronicity, the undifferentiated succession of days, and re-invests modern experience with a dimension of depth.\(^{85}\) To further complicate the picture one finds, upon examination, that each of these levels of experience taken by itself reveals the same characteristic ambiguity as the overall phenomenology of modernity. The structure of experiential bipolarity is, in other words, immanent to each level of experience.

To bring this out from the side of quotidian experience, the important point to note

\(^{85}\) There is an important qualification to be made to this point. While the Baudelairean spleen indicates a trivialization of experience, it does this in such a manner as to remain true to the experience of trivialization. It therefore represents "the scattered fragments of genuine historical experience" (GS I:643, Ill.:185). This is not the case with Bergson's durée, Benjamin notes; on this account the metaphysician "has become far more estranged from history" (ibid.). The same basic observation extends to the concept of the idéal. Bergson's counterpart to this is the concept of authentic memory which to Benjamin assumes an unmistakable vitalist quality (GS I: 608f., Ill.:156f.), whereas the idéal in Baudelaire, by marking an intersection of the atemporal and the profane, in fact anticipates Benjamin's own concept of Eingedenken (GS I: 637ff., Ill.:180ff.).
is that it is not only the actual incidence of traumatic shock that affects the modern subject, but just as much the threat, the relentless low-level exposure to shock factors, the jostling and sudden impositions in the urban crowd, the constant unpredictability of new situations. This gives rise to a dual pattern of seemingly incompatible reactions. On the one hand, the strain of constantly having to be on guard and the pace of shifting impressions entails a risk of a dulling of the senses and of sinking into the state of boredom and existential disinterest that Baudelaire depicted in poetry. As its flip side this typically involves an unfulfilling pursuit of excitement and sensuality, momentary shallow Erlebnisse that are not enriched by Erfahrung. As concrete illustration of this, Benjamin says of Baudelaire’s readers (who have already been described as lacking in will power and the ability to concentrate) that “what they prefer is sensual pleasures; they are familiar with the ‘spleen’ which kills interest and receptiveness” (GS I:607, Ill.:155). Their lot is that of the unskilled worker, who always begins anew with no secure cultural inheritance, no ability to accumulate results or build experience, and no promise of seeing their labour through to completion. On the other hand, however, the chronic state of imminent assault on the perceptive system paradoxically gives rise to a certain heightened sensitivity and presence of mind. Inhabitants of the metropolis learn to cope, although only at the price of cultivating extensive defense mechanisms. Benjamin sees this demeanour of alarm and self-protective alertness epitomized in the figure of the prostitute working the streets while constantly on the lookout for the police (GS I:649, Ill.:191). The figure of Baudelaire himself, the

86 Compare the following description of Baudelaire’s spleen, which is a peculiar way echos the concept of Jetzzeit articulated in On the Concept of History: “But in the spleen the perception of time is supernaturally keen; every second finds consciousness
quintessential modern subject, also displays evidence of a highly mobilized shock defense. In his own words would seek out the streets of the old faubourg "to practice my curious fencing" (opening stanza of *Le Soleil*, GS I:617, Ill.:164), and numerous contemporary descriptions of the poet corroborate this characteristic defensive posture by testifying to his "eccentric grimaces" and "jerky gait," "the cutting quality he could give to his speech," and the manner in which he would stab away with his pencil when setting about to compose (ibid., Ill.:163f.).

To Benjamin these figures are inherently ambiguous - which is to say that they assume the form of dialectical images, as will be further elaborated in Chapter 6. They are the casualties of a leveling of experience yet at the same time exemplary of a model of subjectivity that can rise to the given conditions. In a political context, the critical point is that the same structure of experiential bipolarity is attributable to the masses. Benjamin sees this illustrated by the example of film, which is one of the most pronounced instances of mass art and at the same time a direct conveyer of the continuous exposure to shock. Due to its constant bombardment of the viewer with changing images, film fosters a heightened presence of mind, yet one which precludes concentration and reflection. In a passage particularly repugnant to Adorno (cf. letter of March 18, 1936, GS I:103f.), Benjamin affirms the ensuing distraction effect: "Reception in a state of distraction [in der Zerstreuung], which is increasingly noticeable in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway. ... The public is an examiner, ready to intercept its shocks" (GS I:642, Ill.:184).
but a distracted one [ein zerstreuter]" (GS I:505, Ill.:240f.).

Turning now to the second main dimension of modern experience, the most accurate way to describe this is as a dimension of depth. The primary association conveyed by Benjamin's notion of an impoverishment of experience is one of shallowness, as is consistent with a common perception of modernity as a context of transitory impressions and encounters. But clearly this cannot be the entire picture. The very premise of the Freudian theory adopted by Benjamin is that shock impressions penetrate the protective shell of consciousness and deposit themselves in a deeper layer of the mental system, i.e. in a domain of the subliminal or unconscious. Thus the persistent exposure to shock factors constitutes us as dichotomized subjects governed by a dimension of experience that is not immediately accessible or immediately apparent, not communicable from subject to subject, and not within the realm of volitional control. Broadly speaking, the awareness of this level of heteronomy is a fundamental trait the condition of modernity. It is strikingly indicated by the pattern of behaviour described by Freud as Nachträglichkeit, but it is also, on Benjamin's analysis, a feature of modern technology, notably film, to expose us to patterns of physical behaviour that are not visible to the naked eye and not governed by ordinary consciousness. Benjamin refers to this as an “a dimension of depth” (“eine Tiefenperspektive,”GS I:498, Ill.:235) and accredits the technologies with exposing us to an “enriched ... field of perception” (ibid.).

When measured against the standard of integrated experience that is implied by the romantic concept of tradition and recast in a historical mode by Hegel as the goal of rational self-cultivation, the confrontation with a level of subconscious determination must be
viewed as a threat to the subject. But it may also be viewed as a condition of possibility or, in other words, as an indication of a capacity for experience at a different level. Baudelaire anticipates this type of affirmative response to the phenomenology of modernity in his concept of the idéal as an always latent counterpart to the dullness of modern existence. Beauty, in Baudelaire's conception, arises at the intersection of the eternal and the transitory, and it is the mandate of art to bring about and represent precisely this intersection. In the realm of subjective experience, the same quest for the moment of intersection of the transitory and the eternal may take the form of an active pursuit of intermittent ecstatic experiences. The central project, however, is to seize such Erlebnisse not merely as moments pertaining to a culture of gratification but rather as a source of enrichment of experience itself. This is the basic agenda which Benjamin picks up on in Baudelaire, but he pursues it with caution primarily because he is hesitant about any attempt to constitute exceptional Erlebnisse directly as Erfahrung (in the manner of vitalism). In connection with a critical comment on Bergson's durée, he expressly warns against Erlebnis "strut[ting] about in the borrowed garb of Erfahrung" (GS I:643, II:185). But in a related context, he nevertheless accredits Baudelaire with giving a particular Erlebnis, namely that of confronting shock, battling the crowd, "the weight of Erfahrung" (GS I:653, II:194). An important key to this reconstitution of experience - minimal though it may seem - lies in recognizing an affinity between the ideal and the power of remembrance (GS I:641, II:183). On this account, Eingedenken is marked as integral to Benjamin’s response to the phenomenology of modernity and the characteristic duality of experience that this entails.
Embracing poverty

We have become poor. We have surrendered one piece of the human heritage after the other, often depositing them at the pawnshop for a hundredth of their value, in order to tie ourselves over with the small coins of the topical [das Aktuelle]. In the door stands the economic crisis, behind it a shadow, the coming war. (GS II:219).87

As a last phase of our review of Benjamin's phenomenology of modernity, I propose to return to the question concerning the strategic position that Benjamin adopts in response to the social developments outlined above. As already noted, despite the mix of regret and alarm with which he describes most concrete instances of the decline of experience, he staunchly affirms them. A central reason for this has to do with the sober appraisal that the condition of modernity allows no recourse to a restoration of experiential coherence and continuity - neither in the form of a revival of traditional social structures nor in the dynamic sense attempted by Hegel. But Benjamin's response is also based on an awareness that the condition of cultural impoverishment has its positive aspects. Much as his portrayal of the vanishing of the figure of the storyteller, e.g., is imbued with a tint of sadness, he views the silencing of the authoritarian voice of the father first and foremost as a liberation and a condition of possibility:

87 Wohlfarth translates the phrase "um die kleine Münze des 'Aktuellen' dafür vorgestreckt zu bekommen" as "in return for a few pennies in negotiable currency," but the drawback of this, I believe, is that it diverts attention from Benjamin's emphasis on the question of topicality as integral to the analysis of modernity.
Impoverishment of experience: this should not be taken to imply that people long for a renewal of experience. No, they long to be set free from experience; they long for a world in which their poverty ... can be brought so purely and clearly to bear, that something decent might come of it. (GS II:218)

In this reversal of what appeared to be a context of loss into a fresh promise, it is possible to hear an echo of the Nietzschean “Wohlan!” - if impoverishment is the order of the day, so be it, face up to this challenge too, and smell the morning air. In a less poetic language than that of Zarathustra, but with no less force and determination, Benjamin articulated a similar attitude in the passage that prefaces the present chapter as a maxim of a modernist ethos: to be completely without illusions about one’s age and yet committed to it without reservation (GS II:216). For Benjamin, the motif of a self-imposed poverty was also part of the experience of going into exile (cf. McCole 1993:156ff). The unpublished text Erfahrung und Armut was written in early 1933, immediately after Benjamin felt forced to leave Germany for political reasons (a decision that was soon confirmed by the burning of the Reichstag and the NSDAP’s ascendence to power). In this situation, to articulate the notion of a decline in the value of experience was part of the philologist’s painful decision to abandon the bulk of his cultural heritage (Bildungsgut) and not take much “baggage” with him into his state of exile: “For who can seriously assume that humanity will ever get across the narrow pass that lies before it if burdened with the baggage of a collector or an antique dealer?” (GS II:961f.).

In effect, what Benjamin is articulating here is a commitment to definitively abandon any historicist construal of experience as cultural property. This attitude comes to expression in the form of a liquidationist impulse, which is the side of Benjamin’s cultural
politics that was emphasized by Rolf Tiedemann - with disapproval - in his review of the relation between theology and Marxism in On the Concept of History. But even if a certain advocacy of destruction can be shown to mark a recurrent theme in Benjamin’s writing, it is clear that he is not simply recommending a disconnectedness from the past or a complete abandonment of the cultural heritage. To do so would be too much of an endorsement of the trivialization of experience, or perhaps more accurately, the wrong kind of endorsement. To this it may be added that the very motif of modernity surpassing tradition on a continuous trajectory of historical development is in and of itself historicist. We therefore find that Benjamin’s thinking throughout is also characterized by an exceptionally strong orientation towards the past. At the level of cultural politics and aesthetics, this manifests itself as what Habermas has called a rescuing impulse, which in relation to the category of experience manifests itself in an inclination, if not to restore experience in its pristine form, then at least to rethink the concept in a manner that resists the most alarming consequences of the trivialization of culture.

These, then, are the two seemingly incongruent positions that Benjamin brings into a strategic alliance in response to the phenomenology of modernity. If the prevailing structure of experiential bipolarity is to be seized as a condition of possibility, then the relation of tension in which the liquidationist and rescuing impulses stand with each other needs to be kept vibrant and in clear view. In Benjamin’s presentation, the dialectical relation between the two moments is underscored by the fact that each side taken by itself is described in terms that are inherently ambiguous. But his thinking should not for that reason be dismissed as schizophrenic. When properly construed, the liquidationist and
rescuing impulses can be seen as two aspects of a deliberate strategy of antinomical thinking (cf. McCole) - i.e. pushing oppositions in the given historical or social condition to the point of maximum tension. This, in turn, involves a strategy that I shall describe as mimetic intervention. In the following I will briefly elaborate each of the main thrusts of Benjamin’s critical thinking with a view to bringing out the manner in which his intervention implicates the faculty of memory.

As for the anti-traditionalist side of Benjamin’s strategic intervention in the politics of tradition and modernity, it must be noted that this marks a long-standing theme in Benjamin’s authorship. McCole speaks of “an abiding liquidationist moment in Benjamin’s thinking” and dates this back to the “radical antihumanism” of his earliest works (McCole 1993:157). “[F]rom the time of the youth movement to his work on allegory,” McCole suggests, Benjamin “constantly faced the issue of distinguishing himself from the wrong kind of nihilism” (ibid.:157f.). From the mid-1920s and onwards, the liquidationist undercurrent in Benjamin’s prose is explicitly politicized and appears to be radicalized with increased intensity for every new advance in the rise of fascism. Fundamentally, it is based on a view of the great cultural heritage as oppressive and complicitous in the perpetration of historical wrongs. Thus, while Benjamin shared with the cultural conservatives of his age a view of fascism as a new barbarism, he refused to attribute this merely to a decline or perversion of classical culture (so as to preserve the latter from being tainted by an association with the social disaster of the inter-war era). Phrased differently, Benjamin

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68 In this assessment Benjamin expressly pits himself in opposition to “conservatives in the socialist camp who, as Lukacs will, invoke the past as a humanist ‘heritage’” (Wohlfarth 1994:173 with reference to GS II:473).
insisted that fascism had to be viewed as the extreme consequence of a latent thrust within the great cultural heritage itself. In a sweeping gesture anticipating the central thesis of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* from 1944, he reinforces this point by stipulating that “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (GS I:696, III:256, thesis 7).  

Hence the motif of a self-imposed poverty. Since the bourgeois cultural heritage does not constitute a resource which can effectively be mobilized in opposition to the general decline of culture (of which fascism is an extreme consequence), Benjamin takes the opposite tack and deliberately associates himself with the position of barbarism, although, as he puts it, with “a new, positive concept of barbarism” (GS II:215). What exactly distinguishes Benjamin’s positive concept of barbarism from the other kind is nowhere fully clarified. It is a complex concept which, along with a number of cognate concepts such as, e.g., “the destructive character” and the enigmatic “Apollonian version of the destroyer” (GS IV:397, Refl.:301), is employed variably by Benjamin in different

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*89* Along the same lines, McCole makes the following observation: “As Benjamin saw it, fascism was not an abrupt regression, a sudden relapse into barbarism; it had been prepared by the unrecognized return of archaic compulsions in the ‘advanced’ culture of high capitalism in the nineteenth century. ‘The germ of today’s barbarism already lies enfolded within it. ... National Socialism casts a harsh light on the latter half of the century’ (GS III:574)” (McCole 1993:281f.).

*90* This recalls a notion of “honest barbarity” appearing already in *The Life of Students* from 1915 (GS II:76, SW:38), although the early expression has nowhere near the same intensity and urgency as the texts from the 1930s, where the recent economic crisis and “the shadow of the coming war” place the author’s painful intellectual exile in the relief of a looming barbarism “which is not of the good kind” (GS II:219).
A salient connotation in all of its uses is that destruction comes across essentially as a cathartic endeavour - in relation to the politics of the past, a removal of the burden of tradition or history (the Nietzschean "Es war") and thus a clearing the way for a new beginning. This is the central motif of the 1931 essay explicitly entitled *The Destructive Character*, the main protagonist here being a Benjaminian barbarian who in the spirit of the author's early commitment to the Berlin student movement is portrayed as "youthful and cheerful," yet who "knows only one watchword: make room; only one activity: clearing away" (GS IV:396, Refl.301). The piece concludes with the entirely unsentimental expression of commitment to a future cause: "What exists he reduces to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble, but for the way that leads through it" (GS IV:398, Refl.303). The same motif reappears in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* from 1936. Here Benjamin makes the point that the "tremendous shattering...

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91 Irving Wohlfarth elaborates these tropes in detail in the 1994 essay "No-man's-land" (Wohlfarth 1994:155ff.).

92 Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne list this observation as a point of departure for the 1994 collection of essays on Benjamin entitled *Destruction and Experience*: "For Benjamin, 'destruction' always meant the destruction of some false or deceptive form of experience as the productive condition of the construction of a new relation to the object" (Benjamin and Osborne, eds., 1994:xii). They go on to substantiate their point with reference to a broad cross-section of Benjamin’s authorship and intellectual concerns: "Thus, in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, allegory is seen to destroy the deceptive totality of the symbol, wrenching it out of context and placing it in new, transparently constructed, configurations of meaning. The portrayal of politics as a part of nature (the will of the intriguer) destroys the 'historical ethos'. Similarly, photography is seen to destroy the aura of the object, opening up the possibility of a radically new knowledge (the optical unconscious). In Benjamin's own work, montage destroys the continuity of narrative as the condition for a new construction of history; while now-time destroys the experience of history as progress, replacing it with the apocalyptic doublet of catastrophe and redemption. It is the destructive element that 'guarantees the authenticity of dialectical thought'" (ibid.).
of tradition," which is the underlying theme of his sociology of modernity, "is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind" (GS I:478, Ill.:221). Film, ostensibly, has an important stake in this: "Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value [des Traditionswertes] of the cultural heritage" (GS I:478, Ill.:221).

In all of these expressions of the liquidationist impulse, I suggest that one can detect a pattern of mimetic intervention. By this I understand a strategy of surreptitiously affirming the very dynamics and social developments that the author positions himself against, but doing this in such a manner that the antithetical position is at the same time subverted and its most sinister implications undermined. Almost without exception, Benjamin appropriates and identifies positively with all of the main determinants of social modernization that are linked with the theme of an impoverishment of experience. Thus in addition to associating himself with barbarism and with "poverty" itself, Benjamin also strategically appropriates the underlying factor of shock as integral to his own interventions at several levels. As emphasized in Chapter 1, he integrates the motif in his conception of dialectical thinking: "Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad" (GS I:702f., Ill.:262f., thesis 17, emphasis added). In response to the naive view of history allowing humanist scholars to treat "the current state of emergency" as an exception rather than as the rule, Benjamin likewise advocates coopting the shock factor on the grounds that "it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency" (thesis 8, GS I:697, Ill.:257). 93 This

is precisely the sensibility that he picks up on in Dada and the surrealist movement, of which he notes that "[t]hey exchange to a man, the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds" (GS II:310, Refl.:192). On a further variation on the same theme, as we have previously seen, Benjamin presents the impact of a film on the viewer as one of continuous shock which fosters a heightened presence of mind. His positive evaluation of "reception in a state of distraction," then, must be regarded as an application of the overall strategy of mimetic intervention.

Articulated in general terms, Benjamin’s mimetic intervention may be described as a radicalized form of immanent critique. It is a strategy of not standing out and not opposing the adversary with open force but rather of affecting a subversion from within, surreptitiously, through the mobilization of qualities such as “courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude” to which Benjamin in his historico-philosophical theses attributes “a retroactive force [that] will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers” (GS I:694, Ill.:255, thesis 4). In my analysis of Eingedenken in the coming chapters, it will be found that the faculty of memory plays a fundamental part in this as well. In essence, mimesis is a mnemonic intervention in so far as it is based on a mobilization of forces of resemblance and repetition, thereby seizing critical resources in a subaltern past. When regarded in this light, it becomes apparent that Benjamin’s liquidationist commitment does not imply the type of arbitrary anarchism that Tiedemann attributes to him. To the contrary, it structurally resembles the Marxist strategy of ideology critique by making objective political and socio-cultural dynamics work for a cause of utopian change. But whereas ideology critique in its classical form always criticizes bourgeois ideology by its own
standards with a view to liberating its progressive moment, Benjamin’s negation of ideology abandons any faith in making a rational appeal and no longer anticipates a reconciliation with ideology’s positive moment. In this respect it may be viewed as a precursor to Adorno’s “negative dialectics,” which too mobilizes the force of the determinate negation without expectation of a positive resolution.

The objective historical reason for both Benjamin’s and Adorno’s renouncement of the positive moment of dialectical mediation, I submit, is that ideology itself has declined. In its classical articulations ideology may be defined as a conglomerate of ways in which reconstructions of the past are made to legitimize the present and in which universalizing claims are made to legitimize particular class interests. But by the time of the interwar era, mass ideology had by and large shed the universalist aspiration by which it could be held to point beyond itself to better future. It then declines into pure particularism, a new tribalism of sorts, premised on the naked assertion of group interests in hostile opposition to other groups that are typically demonized. This dynamic is nowhere more pronounced than in the case of fascism, but it shares an uncanny resemblance with social and political developments that have gained widespread saliency in the late decades of the twentieth century. In Adorno’s analysis, the characteristic feature of movements of this type is that ideology once again becomes fully transparent (like in the feudal era), but in this it merely signifies a return of myth devoid of progressive content (Düttmann 1994:32ff.).

In response Adorno asserts a purely negative dialectic, and my argument is that it is in much the same spirit that we should view the liquidationist side of Benjamin’s intervention. This too is in essence a strategy to undermine the credibility of ideology by
exploding it from within. But to this we need to add that Benjamin also asserts a rescuing impulse which, by comparison, would appear to be less pronounced in Adorno’s work. When taken up in the present context, it may be suggested that the rescuing impulse leads Benjamin to respond mimetically to mythologization itself by harking back to a mythology still laden with promise. This was the overriding project of the *Passagenwerk*. It also accounts for the pivotal role of memory in his strategic intervention, namely to forge another connection with a suppressed past and thereby fan “the spark of hope in the past” (GS I:695, Ill.:255, thesis 6).

This, then, brings us to the second main aspect of Benjamin’s response to the phenomenology of modernity. In keeping with the general strategy of antinomical thinking, his liquidationist impulse is offset by a commitment to seizing latent resources in the cultural legacy and somehow restore elements of the concept of experience. Articulated in relation to the theory of a dual structure of experience, it may be suggested that while the trope of *destruction* in Benjamin’s writing is about responding mimetically to the phenomenology of modernity from the side of a leveling of experience, the theme of a *rescue* and the associated patterns of historical and anamnestic practice are about conceptualizing an intervention along the vertical axis, in response to the dimension of phenomenological depth. At the level of perception, this intervention is about connecting with impressions registered in a state of distraction or shock and therefore not accessible to ordinary consciousness. But transposed from psychology to the context of history, it involves treating the past as such as a dimension of depth similar to the unconscious. The aim of Benjamin’s strategic intervention, accordingly, is to gain access to charged moments
of the past that are otherwise excluded from the dominant historical narratives (otherwise characterized as ideology). In both respects, the vertical intervention implicates memory as the critical faculty. Benjamin presents it as an obligation that we owe to past generations. In light of the general inaccessibility of shock phenomena - which is how the perpetration of massive wrong must be regarded in the context of historical consciousness - each fleeting image of the past that we have the possibility to momentarily seize also marks a possibility of laying hold of a moment of genuine experience.

The upshot, then, of the rescuing moment of Benjamin’s intervention in the phenomenology of modernity is to reconceptualize the relationship between remembrance and experience. Viewed in a broad biographical perspective, this endeavour may be seen as consistent with the call for a concept of higher experience that was voiced in some of Benjamin’s earliest works. During his middle and late periods, the pursuit of a revised concept of experience becomes modeled on a wide range of new sources of influence. One striking model, as has been indicated above, is Baudelaire’s concept of the idéal; in this connection the notion of a higher experience is also identified as the experience of the poet (GS I:609, III.:157.). Another key source of influence is the Surrealist concept of profane illumination. On Benjamin’s analysis this is an inherently dubious concept, yet one which contains a progressive moment which the literary critic sets himself to rescue. By far the most important model for an anamnestic rearticulation of the concept of experience, however, is found in Proust’s mémoire involontaire. This, therefore, will be taken as our natural lead when it comes to elaborating the various moments of Eingedenken in Chapters 4 - 6 below, and it will be found that this procedure in turn provides a suitable framework
within which to examine and integrate the other positive sources of influence mentioned here.

In casting the conceptualization of Eingedenken as essentially a variation of the pursuit of a revised concept of experience, however, it must be noted that Benjamin also recognizes a wide range of highly questionable or outright regressive variations of the pursuit of a "higher experience." A common trait against which to be on guard is that regressive interventions in the phenomenology of modernity invariably take the form of compensation strategies in the face of cultural impoverishment and value-nihilism. One relatively benign manifestation of compensating for the loss of traditional social and moral bearings is found in a proliferation of proto-New-Age movements in the aftermath of World War I. Thus Benjamin notes in _Erfahrung und Armut_ that:

> An entirely new destitution [Armseligkeit] has overcome humanity with this tremendous expansion of technology. And the flip side of this destitution is the disconcerting wealth of ideas [Ideenreichum] which has appeared among, or rather has overcome, people with the recent revival of astrology and yogawisdom, Christian Science and Chiromantie [sic.], vegetarianism and gnosticism, scholasticism and spiritism. (GS II:214f.)

A more sinister manifestation of essentially the same impulse is found in various political attempts at rallying the masses around the restoration of an allegedly authentic tradition. In the context of modernity, tradition proves itself to always be vulnerable to ideological manipulation, and in Benjamin's era the very notion of a restoration of authentic tradition inevitably resonated overtones of fascism - the latter drawing its strength from a massive resentment against the dysphoria of modernity (of which fascism itself was an expression) culminating in the cult of _Blut und Boden_. On Benjamin's analysis, such obviously
regressive forms of mass mobilization reveal an unsettling affinity with the more elitist
project of vitalism (or Lebensphilosophie), which may thus be taken as yet another example
of sinister compensation strategies associated with the desire to restore genuine experience.
Articulated directly in relation to his theme of an impoverishment of experience, Benjamin
makes the connection in the following manner:

Since the end of the last century, philosophy has made a series of attempts to lay
hold of the 'true' experience as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the
standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses. It is customary to classify these
efforts under the heading of a philosophy of life [Lebensphilosophie]. Their point of
departure, understandably enough, was not man's life in society. What they invoked
was poetry, preferably nature, and, most recently, the age of myths. Dilthey's book
_Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung_ represents one of the earliest of these efforts which
end with Klages and Jung; both made common cause with Fascism. (GS I:608,
Ill.:156)

Whereas the "Ideenreichum" invoked before is merely trivial, the vitalist position is
challenging to Benjamin because it in important ways resembles his own abiding pursuit of
a concept of higher experience.⁵⁴ He therefore felt a pressing need to clarify the
fundamental differences and on this account expressed a long-standing intention of
undertaking a proper Klages study. Unfortunately this study never materialized, but we
have in other connections been presented with an important indication of what, in
Benjamin's mind, set his own position apart from vitalism. The crucial point is that the
latter projects a one-sided pursuit of Erlebnis, i.e. conflates Erlebnis and Erfahrung. The

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⁵⁴ Benjamin was since his youth strongly attracted to the work of Klages and even
aspired to meet with him in Munich in 1915. His later work remained heavily influenced,
e.g., by Klages' theory of dream consciousness and only very gradually did Benjamin begin
same motif is brought up in reference to Bergson (GS I:643, III.:185) and to aspects of Baudelaire’s poetry, thus reinforcing the urgent need to attain a viable contemporary account of the dialectic and mutual integration of the two moments of experience. What has further been established is that such an account has to be responsive to the prevalence of the Erlebnis of shock (and in this manner identify positively with the phenomenology of modernity). This, in a nutshell, is what Benjamin’s interventions at the level of the philosophy of memory are about.

Kafka exposition: Patterns of forgetting

What is actually and in a very precise sense folly in Kafka is that this, the most recent of experiential worlds, was conveyed to him precisely by the mystical tradition. This, of course, could not have happened without devastating occurrences ... within this tradition. (Corr.:564)

Before turning explicitly to the concept of Eingedenken, it will be relevant to consider one further aspect of Benjamin’s critique of modernity, namely the perspective contained in his Kafka studies. Aside from the Baudelaire and Leskov studies, this is actually the section of Benjamin’s authorship where the themes concerning an atrophy of experience and a destruction of tradition are most directly related to the topic of memory. In construing modernity first and foremost as a context of forgetting, the Kafka studies set the stage for a mnemonic intervention, and, as I shall argue, they contain sufficient positive
indications of a corresponding concept of memory to establish the main parameters of Benjamin’s own intervention in the philosophy of remembering and forgetting.

Being cast first and foremost as a study in literary criticism, Benjamin’s primary essay on Kafka, the 1934 essay entitled *Franz Kafka: On the tenth Anniversary of His Death*, incorporates less of a sociological perspective than, e.g., his reading of Baudelaire, but it nevertheless marks one of his strongest statements on the dialectics of tradition and modernity. Essentially, Benjamin reads Kafka as a Jewish writer mimetically embracing the remains of an amputated tradition (both Rabbinical and Kabbalist95) in a context of atrophied experience. The latter theme, Benjamin sees prefigured in an early note by Kafka, which states “I have experience ... and I am not joking when I say that it is seasickness on dry land” (GS II:428, III:130). In a letter to Scholem dated June 12, 1938, Benjamin returns to the notion of Kafka writing in a field of heightened tension between tradition and modernity: “Kafka’s work is an ellipse with foci that lie far apart and are determined on the one hand by mystical experience (which is above all the experience of tradition) and on the other hand by the experience of the modern city dweller” (Corr.:563). Prima facie, this would appear to indicate recourse to a dimension of tradition that is not contaminated by modernity, and it is true that aside from occasionally figuring as a relic of the past and a world in decline, the notion of tradition in Benjamin’s work almost invariably retains the connotation of a source of leverage, perhaps even resistance.96 But the tradition mobilized

95 “Kabbalah” being Hebrew for “tradition,” as noted by Scholem in a footnote to the published version of the letter cited at the head of this chapter (Corr.:566).

96 This is true, e.g., of the figure of the storyteller; cf. A. Benjamin 1989:126f.).
by Kafka is nevertheless profoundly shaped by modernity. According to Benjamin, it is
retained only in form - its content, paternal wisdom, being subject to the forces of atrophy
or at least being impossible to articulate in positive terms. Already in the Kafka essay of
1934, Benjamin identifies Kafka’s tales as parables [Gleichnisse] without doctrine [Lehre]
(GS II:420, Ill.:122), and the theme is restated in 1938 in the suggestion that Kafka adopted
the “entirely new” strategy of retaining the transmissibility [Tradierbarkeit] of wisdom at
the expense of sacrificing truth (Corr.565). In this manner, Benjamin envisions the form of
tradition attaining a subversive force. As stated with reference to Kafka’s peculiar prose:
“Kafka’s writings are by their nature parables. But it is their misery and their beauty that
they had to become more than parables. They do not modestly lie at the feet of doctrine, as
Haggadah [the Passover prayer book] lies at the feet of Halakah [Jewish law]. When they
have crouched down, they unexpectedly raise a mighty paw against it” (ibid.).

By giving himself over to a traditional narrative form, Kafka depicts what Benjamin
describes as “a complementary world” (ibid.:564). But by doing this he is able to give voice
to the ineffable and convey an unsettling image of a context of experience [Erlebnis] that
otherwise defies assimilation to Erfahrung - “that reality of ours which is projected
theoretically, for example, in modern physics, and practically in the technology of warfare”
and which “is preparing itself to annihilate the inhabitants of this planet on a massive scale”
(Corr.:564). The social imagery portrayed by Kafka is that of a distorted world. In stark

97 Among a series of further variations on the theme of form without predefined
content may be mentioned the recurrent motif in Kafka of gestures without discernable
meaning. On the latter count, Benjamin makes the sweeping claim that “Kafka’s entire
work constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definitive symbolic meaning for
the author from the outset” (GS II:418, Ill.:120).
opposition to Hegel’s vision of an environment in which subjective spirit can finally find itself at home and unfold its capacities to the fullest - a “new existence, a new world, and a new shape of spirit” (Hegel 1986:591, §808) - Kafka’s living spaces are invariably filthy and stifling, the air being putrid and contaminated by “abortive and overripe elements” (“all dem Ungewordenen und Überreifen,” GS II:424, Ill.:126). His characters are subject to a maximum alienation from the body, as is conveyed by their propensity for metamorphoses whereby humans suddenly change into animals and insects (ibid.). And far from figuring as the embodiment of reason in history, Kafka’s public institutions are unfathomable and impenetrable. They testify to a collapse of moral agency, nowhere more poignantly captured than in the motif of judgement and guilt without awareness of the crime. It must be noted that the theme of modernity as a context of distortion is also extended to the remaining strongholds of tradition, thus preempting any temptation to a romantic idealization of the latter. This is evident, e.g., in Kafka’s unfailing portrayal of the family context as oppressive. Benjamin states the point bluntly: “[T]he fathers in Kafka’s strange families batten on their sons, lying on top of them like giant parasites. They prey not only upon their strength, but gnaw away at the sons’ right to exist” (GS II:411ff., Ill.:114).

What is of particular interest in our present context is that Benjamin links this entire complex of social distortion - what may in an Adornian sense be described as “a damaged life” - closely with a theme of forgetting.98 Whereas Hegel viewed the possibility of human self-realization as the result of a consummate historical remembrance, the animals, hunchbacks, and other strange creatures that inhabit Kafka’s stories are the casualties of a

forgetting, indeed "receptacles of the forgotten" (GS II:430, Ill.:132). This point is made most directly in connection with the figure Odradek from The Cares of a Family Man, which Benjamin describes as "[t]he strangest bastard which the prehistoric world has begotten with guilt in Kafka" (GS II:431, Ill.:132). "Odradek," Benjamin suggests, "is the form which things assume in oblivion. They are distorted [entstellt]" (GS II:431, Ill.:133).

In this one hears echoes of a Freudian theme of a return of the repressed, of shock leading to amnesia and forgetting as pathogenic, of hysterics suffering from reminiscences, etc., which Ian Hacking has summarized in the formula "the forgotten is the formative."99 In connection with his Kafka study, Benjamin expresses the same basic idea in a phrase that could be attributed to Freud. He says of the forgotten past that "[t]he fact that it is now forgotten does not mean that it does not extend into the present. On the contrary: it is actual by virtue of this very oblivion" ("gegenwärtig ist sie durch diese Vergessenheit," GS II:428, Ill.:130).

While retaining the basic notion of a debilitating forgetting, Benjamin sets his rendition of this apart from the idiom of psychoanalysis by linking it with a trope of prehistory that is employed in an entirely idiosyncratic manner.100 He thus attributes the characteristically Kafkan moral collapse reflected in the possibility of K. being guilty without any awareness of the norm violated to a rule of prehistoric forces: "Laws and definite norms remain unwritten in the prehistoric world. A man can transgress them

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100 Urgeschichte, often translated as "urhistory" by Benjamin commentators so as to preserve the affinity with Benjamin's notion of origin: Ursprung.
without suspecting it ... In Kafka the written law is contained in books, but these are secret; by basing itself on them the prehistoric world exerts its rule all the more ruthlessly" (GS II:412, III.:114f.). In Freud (as implicitly in Hegel), any compulsion to repeat, which is the standard form of the pathology of forgetting, signals a determination by heteronomous forces that jeopardize the autonomy of the subject. In keeping with his loyalty with the victims of distortion and his reluctance to posit any facile programme of reparation, Benjamin avoids reference to such an “upright” concept as autonomous subjectivity, yet the basic Freudian idea is retained in the negative in so far as prehistory, in Benjamin's writing, always signals a context of determination by mythical forces. In connection with his reading of Kafka, this is in fact presented as a determination by forces so archaic that recorded myth is by comparison already an expression of enlightenment (GS II:415, III.:117). In addition to the connotation of heteronomous determination, Benjamin's notion of prehistory is also deliberately invested with a vague echo of utopian potential, as in the image of radical freedom sometimes associated with pre-civilized humanity. Importantly, this nexus of an enslavement to (second) nature and the utopia of a classless society is not conceived as a phase prior to history but rather as a latent reality underlying, and entering into unique constellations with, a given historical context. This is also the sense in which the *Passagenwerk* from about 1935 and onwards was envisioned by Benjamin as a

101 Compare Comay 1994:259: “Under such conditions, it would be idealism of the worst sort to celebrate, à la Bloch, the orthopaedia of the upright posture.” Nevertheless, the issue of autonomy is continually probed by Benjamin in a variety of different forms, e.g. in connection with his sustained attempt to push beyond the opposition between voluntary and involuntary (as examined in Chapters 4 and 5) and in his pursuit of what Horkheimer and Adorno were later to describe as a re-membrance of the nature in the subject (“Eingedenken der Natur im Subjekt,” 1969 [1944]:47).
“prehistory of the 19th century”. Although somewhat cryptic, an entry in Konvolut N introducing the notion of prehistory emphasizes its dual significance as a contemporary reality and at the same time a point of crystallization of submerged mythic forces:

‘Prehistory of the nineteenth century’ - this would have no interest, if we understood it to mean that prehistoric forms are to be rediscovered among the stocks of the nineteenth century. The concept of a prehistory of the nineteenth century has meaning only where it is to be presented as the original form of that prehistory, that is, as a form in which all of prehistory groups itself anew in images peculiar to the last century. (GS V:579, N 3a,2)\(^{102}\)

A central trait of Benjamin’s notion of a prehistory constituted by forgetting is that it marks the site of a confluence of the individual and the collective past. “What has been forgotten” Benjamin notes with reference to Kafka, “... is never something purely individual. Everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world [and] forms countless, uncertain, changing compounds, yielding a constant flow of new, strange products. Oblivion is the container from which the inexhaustible intermediate world in Kafka’s stories presses towards the light” (GS II:430, III.:131). Not coincidentally, this passage presents us with an exact inversion of how traditional memory is described in On Some Motifs in Baudelaire. As cited earlier, it is here noted that “[w]here there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine

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\(^{102}\) Compare Corr.:490. It has often been noted that this concept bears a close affinity with the notion of origin expounded in Benjamin’s Trauerspiel book, The Origin of the German Tragic Drama: “Origin [Ursprung], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [Entstehung]. 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 ...” (GS I:226, OGT:45).
with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals ... kept producing an amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again” (GS I: 611, Ill.:159). The parallelism between these two passages presents a striking illustration of how Kafka, according to Benjamin, attains his perspective on modernity by mobilizing the resources of a disfigured tradition. But it indicates more than that; it is a powerful reminder that the theme of forgetting central to Benjamin’s analysis of modernity prefigures a revised notion of remembrance, and indeed one which will retain significant traits of traditional memory. In several important respects, moreover, there is an overlap between the functions of remembrance and forgetting, and at certain key junctures of Benjamin’s prose the two tend to become indistinguishable.

To gain a clear perspective on the manner in which certain important parameters of Benjamin’s intervention in the philosophy of remembering and forgetting are being defined in his Kafka study, one needs to note that in the very segment of the essay where the theme of remembrance is most directly addressed, Benjamin actually posits a reduplication of forgetting. He cites Willy Haas, with approval, to the effect that:

the object of the trial ... indeed, the real hero of this incredible book is [the type of] forgetting, whose main characteristic is the forgetting of itself ... It probably cannot be denied that ‘this mysterious center ... derives from the Jewish religion.’ ‘Memory plays a very mysterious role as piousness. It is not an ordinary, but ... the most profound quality of Jehovah that he remembers. (GS II:429, Ill.:131, emphasis added)

In analogy with the distinction posited here between forgetting and the forgetting of forgetting, we can infer a similar reduplication of the function of memory. There is a remembrance proper, firstly, which reverses forgetting and sets distortions right. This is the
remembrance attributed to God; it is associated with a power of redemption and is elsewhere in Benjamin’s writing characterized as messianic. Secondly there is a remembrance which remembers the fact of forgetting, i.e. opposing the forgetting of forgetting. This form of memory holds no direct promise of redemption, but it preserves the possibility, keeps the hope alive.

To anticipate a later development of this study, it may be observed that Wohlfarth interprets the notion invoked by Benjamin of a reduplication of forgetting, in other words a “self-perpetuating act of forgetting,” as an expression of the biblical notion of the Fall (Wohlfarth 1989:162). This motif he in turn identifies as constitutive of an entire strain of Western Marxism which emphasizes a “double reification” as the theological paradigm of alienation. Bourgeois society is the “hell that does not recognize itself as such. Not only is Paradise lost, so too is the very awareness of its loss. Fallen man has forgotten that he has forgotten; like Spinoza’s stone, he does not know that he is falling. To start regaining Paradise, we would have to begin to remember that we had forgotten” (ibid.:165).

The first notion of memory implied by Haas, i.e. divine memory, is not further elaborated in connection with Benjamin’s reading of Kafka. Just as Kafka avoided associating his parables with any positive doctrine (thus retaining only the form of their transmissibility), so does he refrain from making any attempt at a specification of what redemption would be like. Benjamin interprets this in light of the biblical injunction against positively identifying the divine attributes: “No other writer has obeyed the commandment ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image’ so faithfully” (GS II:428, III.:129).

Nevertheless, Benjamin’s text contains certain pointers. He cites a “great rabbi” for saying
that when the Messiah comes one day to set things right in the distorted world, he will "not wish to change the world by force but [will] only make a slight adjustment in it" (GS II:432, III.134). If this saying is taken to provide an indication of Benjamin's own politics of remembrance and redemption, I expect it may be attributed significant implications. It suggests that Eingedenken - like the Hegelian notion of Erinnerung, but in a very different manner - projects itself through an immanent appropriation of existing social forces and tendencies rather than through the imposition of an external will. This is the underlying thrust of Benjamin's general strategy of mimetic intervention. It must be acknowledged, however, that this interpretation is in some respects difficult to reconcile with the liquidationist terms in which Benjamin elsewhere characterizes his politics of the past. This area of tension needs to be further examined in the following chapters.

The second function of memory, to the contrary, is developed in some detail in the Kafka study. Fundamentally, the idea of "remembering forgetting" is a question of recognizing distortion for what it is and maintaining a solidarity with the victims of a damaged life. Benjamin expresses this sense of solidarity in countless ways - in his choice of topics and in his sensitivity to neglected detail, the outmoded and the forgotten - but perhaps nowhere more vividly than in the words of a German folk rhyme, which has given

103 Wohlfarth links this passage explicitly with the force of Eingedenken, which he describes as a "remedy against distorting forgetting" ("Heilmittel gegen das entstellende Vergessen"). He notes that "what forgetting distorts, Eingedenken will set right" ("Was das Vergessen entstellt, wird das Eingedenken zurechstellt;" Wohlfarth 1988:128).

104 Wohlfarth associates this "eristic dialectic, which ... enters the opponents strength" with Brecht's notion of Umfunktionierung, yet notes that even this motif is subject to a "refunctioning" and is employed by Benjamin in an "un-Brechtian" manner (Wohlfarth 1994:168f.).
name to a section of the Kafka study and which likewise forms the focus of the concluding section of his childhood memories Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert. The rhyme is entitled The Little Hunchback [Das bucklicht Männlein]. It depicts many misfortunes and mishaps for which the small man is responsible, but nevertheless ends with the entreaty: “My dear child, I beg of you, / Pray for the little hunchback too” (GS II:432, Ill.:134).105

The figure of the hunchback, to Benjamin, is “the original image [Urbilde] of distortion” (GS II:431, Ill.:133) and to pray for him too means to remember the harm suffered by the victims of forgetting shedding their human form.106 This, above all, was Kafka’s forte. He may or may not have prayed, Benjamin observes, but “in [his] attentiveness he included all living creatures, as saints include them in their prayers” (GS II:432, Ill.:134).

A similar attentiveness is displayed by some of Kafka’s peculiar peripheral characters, notably the students and the fools, who have it in common that they never sleep. Learning is seen as a way of fending off amnesia: “It is a tempest blowing from the land of oblivion, and learning is a cavalry attack against it” (GS II 436, Ill.:138). To be more precise, what Kafka’s students present as an antidote to the forgetting that otherwise goes unnoticed is not learning proper but rather the gesture of learning. Doctrine has fallen by the wayside, Kafka’s students are “pupils who have lost the Holy Writ,” and therefore

105 Liebes Kindlein, ach, ich bitt, / Bet fürs bucklicht Männlein mit.

106 Wohlfarth (1989:205), and following him Comay (1994:258), identifies the bucklicht Männlein as the hunchback named “theology” in thesis 1 of On the Concept of History. This is interesting, because it indicates that not only does Benjamin retain steadfast loyalty to the casualties of oppression and forgetting, the silent Other of blind “progress,” he also anticipates the possibility - by only a “slight adjustment”(GS II: 432, Ill.:134) - of mobilizing this Other against the forces of repression and forgetting. For a further discussion of the figure of the hunchback in Benjamin, see Wohlfarth 1988:127ff.
"Kafka does not dare attach to this learning the promises which tradition has attached to the study of the Torah" (GS II:437, III.:139). For the same reason, the memory of the students and insomniacs is not actually redemptive but only a means of keeping a vigil, of keeping forgetting at bay and just barely keeping the hope of redemption alive. "Don't forget the best!" says a motto which Benjamin attributes to "a nebulous bunch of old stories." This could be taken as a condensed definition of the second function of memory invoked in the Kafka study, since, as Benjamin observes, "forgetting always involves the best, for it involves the possibility of redemption" (GS II:434, III.:136).

In conclusion of this chapter, I propose briefly to outline how Benjamin's Kafka reading implicitly brings into play certain important inversions of remembrance and forgetting. We may begin by noting that there is something strange about describing oblivion [das Vergessenheit] as "the container [das Behältnis] from which the inexhaustible intermediate world in Kafka's stories presses towards the light" (GS II:430, III.:131; my emphasis). Ordinarily one would be more inclined to think of memory as a container and a source of subliminal images, and indeed the notion of memory which Benjamin gleans from his reading of Proust, the mémoire involontaire, signifies precisely this. Yet Proust too projects a conception of forgetting as a container and guardian of memories. The key to this apparent confusion, I submit, lies in recognizing the close entanglement of remembrance and forgetting. As we shall see in connection with an elaboration of Benjamin's concept of Eingedenken, there is sense in which forgetting is also a preservation and a guard against distortion. And conversely, there is a form of remembrance which contributes to distortion and against which one must be on guard. The latter manifests itself in various forms of
(ideological, self-interested) manipulation of the past and may, generally speaking, be described as a mode of remembrance which reconstructs the past as inevitable progress culminating in, and thereby legitimizing, a certain state of affairs in the present. This is a remembrance which orients itself towards the present and the future and is therefore oblivious to suffering in the past. Far from reversing the forgetting of forgetting, it cements it.

In keeping with the general parameters of Benjamin’s politics of the past as outlined in Chapter 1, this type of forgetful remembrance may be identified as historicist. What is fundamentally at stake in Benjamin’s articulation of the concept of Eingedenken, accordingly, is to counter this and furnish a notion of remembrance which, in recognition of the salience of forgetting, remains true to the phenomenology of modernity.
Chapter 4

Conceptualizing Eingedenken: Initial Determinations

Steht nicht das ungewollte Eingedenken, Prousts mémoire involontaire dem Vergessen viel näher als dem, was meist Erinnerung genannt wird?
(Zum Bilde Prousts, GS II:311)

A composite concept

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.
(On the Concept of History, thesis 17)

Eingedenken, in Benjamin’s usage, indicates a conceptual innovation. I have argued that Benjamin’s choice of a neologism to designate this mode of memory suggests a deliberate attempt to re-conceptualize memory in a manner that is responsive to the “changes in the structure of experience” under the condition of modernity. This is decisive for the overall agenda defined in Chapter 3 of offering a viable contemporary account of the integration of Erlebnis and Erfahrung. Given the prevalence, indeed normalization, of
the experience (Erlebnis) of shock, what kind of Erfahrung can be envisioned for the
modern, decentred subject? To adequately respond to this question, so the core premise of
the present argument goes, means to undertake a radical innovation at the level of the
philosophy of memory. What Benjamin sets himself to accomplish, in effect, is a
counterpart to the manner in which Hegelian Erinnerung complements the classical project
of Bildung, but now articulated in response to the condition of experiential bipolarity and in
keeping with Benjamin’s strategic determination to embrace the impoverishment which
also characterizes the experience of modernity. This is directly antithetical to the
comprehensive Hegelian agenda of inheriting the wealth of culture, for while Hegel too
responds to an experience of impoverishment or alienation, this is always already overcome
by the time of its articulation, always already past in the sense of being retroactively
mastered. To Benjamin recovering the past means positing it as a active force in the
present.

Underlying Benjamin’s entire intervention at the level of phenomenology, what is
further at stake is a commitment to rethink practice. The urgency of this endeavour was
brought out in Chapter 1 with reference to Benjamin’s late work, notably On the Concept
of History and the philosophical notes for the Passagenwerk. As observed by both
Tiedemann and Habermas, a defining feature of Benjamin’s intervention in the politics of
the past is that it abandons the Hegelian Marxist strategies of ideology critique and
consciousness-raising, i.e. the key strategies supporting an agenda of mediating between
subjective and objective spirit and thereby realizing humanity’s freedom in history.
However, rather than viewing this as a fault on Benjamin’s part - essentially a shortcoming
in his grasp of historical materialism, which in the end was the political verdict passed by both Habermas and Tiedemann - the present study explores the possibility of viewing Benjamin's rupture with Hegelian premises as a step towards conceptualizing a different mode of critique premised on a radically different conception of temporality, history, and human agency. Again, the re-conceptualization of memory lies at the heart of this endeavour, and although its political implications only become fully apparent during Benjamin's final years, the conceptual foundation upon which it is based had been long in the making.107 A central claim to be substantiated in the following, therefore, is that all parts of Benjamin's authorship dealing with memory from the late 1920s and onwards form part of one and the same overall endeavour and that the political stakes raised in Chapter 1 are integral to this project throughout.

The overarching purpose of the remaining three chapters of my study is to elucidate Benjamin's concept of Eingedenken in its various moments and implications. I seek to develop an integrated perspective on the different themes associated with memory (collecting, storytelling, dreaming, profane illumination, historiography, redemption, etc.), the various levels of significance attached to the function of memory (artistic, social, cognitive, existential, political, etc.), and the varying contexts in which Benjamin addresses the topic. The key to developing such an integrated perspective, in my interpretation, is that

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107 Aspects of Benjamin's rethinking of temporality and experience actually reach all the way back to his pre-World War I association with the German youth movement; parts reach back to his dissertation on Romantic literary criticism, where the notion of "Kritik" is expressly defined in a non-Kantian fashion (cf. Wohlfarth 1980:134ff.). But as explained in my general Introduction, my primary focus in the present connection will be on the works succeeding the Trauerspiel study.
Eingedenken must be recognized as a *composite* mental function. Unlike other concepts of memory, it cannot be described in terms of one simple cognitive motion. The function of recall, e.g., which in the age of information technology has emerged as the dominant trope of memory, may be described simply as the ability to access and retrieve stored information. Erinnerung, similarly, has in *Chapter 2* been conceptualized in a unified manner as the ability to recall, "own," narratively integrate and thus retroactively master past experiences. Eingedenken, however, can only be described as the interplay between two mental processes which are distinct, in some respects mutually exclusive, but nevertheless interdependent. This basic duality is nicely captured in the passage from *On the Concept of History* where Benjamin states - with reference to the cognitive capacity in general - that thinking involves both a *flow* of thoughts and their *arrest* (thesis 17). Closely related to this, Benjamin’s concept of Eingedenken will be seen to unfold through the interplay and tension between an *ecstatic* and a *sobering* moment, and similarly between *attentiveness* and *distraction* and between the *voluntary* and the *involuntary*.

Like all conceptual oppositions in terms of which Benjamin structures his thinking, the oppositions mentioned here prove to be inherently unstable. Like the oppositions of Erfahrung and Erlebnis, loss and liberation, etc., examined in *Chapter 3*, the contrasting moments structuring the concept of Eingedenken are mutually entangled and involve one another in complicated patterns. The ecstatic moment of Eingedenken, e.g., will thus be found to involve a sobering aspect, and the sobering moment integrates the ecstatic.\(^{108}\) The

\(^{108}\) Wohlfarth observes that "[t]wo totally different versions of soberness underlie the exchanges between Benjamin and Brecht. The latter feels drawn to logical positivism, and considers Chopin and Dostoevski unwholesome. Benjamin’s notion of soberness goes
upshot of this is that the concept of Eingedenken displays a dialectical structure, but it does so in accordance with Benjamin’s idiosyncratic notion of a dialectic at a standstill (which has been touched upon in Chapter 1 above and will be more closely examined in Chapter 6) where oppositions are not continually mediated and resolved but where conceptual development rather tends to gravitate towards paradoxical hybrid forms charged with a particular tension such as, e.g., an arrested flow, ecstatic sobriety, attentive distraction, and involuntary practice.

The dialectical structure of the concept of Eingedenken has nowhere been fully elucidated in the literature on Benjamin. A central ambition of the present study is therefore to contribute to this. I seek to capture the inner complexity and dynamic of the concept by developing it in three phases, each of which will be elaborated in a separate chapter. The first moment, to which the present chapter is devoted, builds on a commonplace (although philosophically neglected) experience of remembrance as cognitive flow. The Proustian influence on Benjamin’s thinking about memory at this level of conceptual development is profound, and the central determination of the first moment of Eingedenken may accordingly be taken to be its status as involuntary memory. Although one should not expect the opposition pairs listed above to neatly overlap, the predominant tendency is for Benjamin to link this up with the ecstatic aspect of Eingedenken, the fundamental significance of which is to serve as a means of gaining access to the unconscious and hence also to the type of Erlebnis, examined in Chapter 3, which is registered in a state of shock.

back to German Romantic speculation, which considered prose not as the sober antithesis of poetry but as its ‘creative ground’ (GS I:102), the colourless ‘sober light’ (ibid.:119) which comprises the whole spectrum within it” (Wohlfarth 1994:168).
The second moment of Eingedenken, in my interpretation, is defined by a thrust towards seizing the involuntary, thus in effect destabilizing the opposition between voluntary and involuntary. What is at stake for Benjamin in this connection is to constitute Eingedenken as a practice. In contrast to the former moment, this may be thought of as a sobering aspect of his concept of memory, but a more meaningful description would be to say that it is fundamentally about grasping the nature of the ecstatic flow and mobilizing it in relation to various spheres of practice, notably the practice of writing (in the case of Proust) and the pursuit of material culture, as is epitomized by Benjamin’s figure of the collector. The third moment of Eingedenken is the moment of interruption proper. This gains its consummate expression in the dialectical image which at one and the same time manifests a determinate content seized from the flow of involuntary memory and serves as a catalyst through which objective historical tensions may crystallize. The dialectical image, in other words, constitutes the significant constellation of past and present towards which Benjamin’s entire historiography is oriented. It marks, by the same token, the definitive transition from a concept of memory as private interiority to memory as a public event. Only at this level does Benjamin’s concept of Eingedenken fully realize its definition as political practice.

**Preliminary sketch: remembrance as ecstatic flow**

To form a preliminary impression of what it is like to remember in the manner of Eingedenken or, more accurately, the aspect of Eingedenken that is identifiable as a mental flow, one might consider the familiar experience of contemplating a photograph of a loved
one, an old friend or an adversary - someone who was once important in our life. Or
imagine visiting a burial site, a monument of personal importance. The occasion need
neither be momentous nor somber: the chance encounter in a basement or an attic with a
favorite childhood toy would do equally well for the purpose of forming a preliminary
impression of Eingedenken. What all of these examples have in common is to trigger a
mental process that is readily recognizable as remembering, yet which displays a very
different thrust than the mechanism of Hegelian “Er-innerung” examined in Chapter 2.
Rather than integrating dispersed fragments of experience with one’s general sense of self,
remembering in our present case implies losing oneself in thought and visiting corners of
the mind that may long have remained dormant and neglected. If the experience is allowed
to continue undisturbed, it expands. One memory image leads to another in intricate non-
linear patterns, new forgotten avenues are revisited, new shades from the past begin to
emerge, and hints of old aspirations and failures announce themselves - elusive yet
imposing and unsettling. It is important to emphasize that this is not merely an ideational
experience. Memory images of the sort emerging on their own accord are typically coloured
by affect, often in varying, subtle nuances. In the span of a brief moment, one may live
through an entire register of emotions, and if there is such a thing as a memory of the senses
- a subconscious registration of sensual similarities, or a secret reliving of sensual
impressions - no doubt this comes into play as well. Few are capable of sustaining the
process for very long, but by extrapolation - if one could simultaneously push forward and
somehow hold on to the memory images as they emerge - it would permit us access to vast
segments of a forgotten life, indeed an entire dimension of experience that is ordinarily not
accessible.

The basic gist of this sketch is to accentuate the ecstatic aspect of memory. This may be summarized by the motif of Eingedenken as a submersion or, in other words, of remembrance as a downward motion decentring the subject. What is generally being implied is, on the one hand, that the mental landscape can be charted in terms of a layered topology and, on the other hand, that the cognitive process of abandoning oneself to a flow of memory images is describable as a motion of descent into the deeper layers of the mind. Kittsteiner speaks of "a topographical descent into the underworld" (Kittsteiner 1986:196). Variations on this motif abound in Benjamin's writing, as, e.g., in the imagery of the remembering author as a fisherman pursuing his catch in the bottom-most stratum of involuntary memory (GS I:323f., Ill.:214). In a fragment from the Passagenwerk the urban landscape is similarly portrayed as being shot through with secret triggers of involuntary memory, which are likened to the sites in ancient Greece that were known to lead "down into the underworld" (GS V:1046). One should note that the trope of submersion, while here being employed in a broad sense, in a Benjaminian context unmistakably invokes associations to the term Versenkung in the Trauerspiel study. Somewhat misleadingly - yet with the effect of capturing an important aspect of the phenomenon, cf. the section below titled "Critique of the ecstatic moment" - this is presented as "introversion" in the English translation of the book. To Benjamin this general topology is closely linked with the themes of brooding (Grübelei) and melancholy (cf. Pensky 1996:170ff.). As stated in The Origin of

109 "Within the fiction of Proust's novel, the narrator's moments of ecstasy are key to a descent into his past 'life'" (Schlossman 1988:110).
German Tragic Drama, "introversion [Versenkung] ... led only too easily into the abyss. This is illustrated by the theory of the melancholy disposition" (GS I:320, OGT:142). At a later stage of conceptual development (notably in Chapter 6) we shall find that the melancholy disposition in certain important respects carries over into the concept of Eingedenken, yet it is an aspect of Eingedenken which Benjamin continually strives to check by investing the concept with an extroverted, activating dynamic.¹⁰

The ecstatic quality of Eingedenken is further accentuated by Benjamin through a recurrent association of memory with various altered mental states - states which Eingedenken is at one and the same time shown to resemble and deployed to overcome. The most prominent of these is the state of dreaming, which we spontaneously experience as precisely this: a submerged state in which we are witness to an intricate flow of quasi-visual, quasi-sensuous, and emotionally charged 'thought-images' that resonate many layers of significance and tend to branch out in many different directions at once. To Benjamin, this theme is particularly well brought out by the nocturnal author Marcel Proust, and he therefore focuses a central part of his explication of the mémoire involontaire on what he calls "the bridge to the dream" (GS I: 313, Ill.:204). To firmly establish this bridge, Benjamin makes a point of associating virtually every attribute of involuntary memory with the state of dreaming. This link extends to his own concept of Eingedenken as well. Like

¹⁰ Interestingly, the word Versenkung is also used by Benjamin to characterize Proust, who is attributed the quality of a "Versenkung des Mystikers" (GS I:310; translated into English as "the absorption of a mystic," Ill.:201). While Benjamin registers this trait with unmistakable fascination (McCole counts it among the qualities he might well have wished for his own," McCole 1993:253), it is clearly also a trait against which to be on guard (compare Schlossman 1988:110).
dreams, Eingedenken is found to be involuntary and spontaneous, intensely pleasurable and unnerving, it does not follow a linear logic but rather a pattern of weaving, it displays pronounced auratic characteristics, and it marks a primary instance of mimetic thinking. Several of these features of Eingedenken will be taken up in further detail below; the important point at the present juncture is the unmistakable allusion to the Freudian theme of dreams as a privileged source of access to the unconscious. By emphasizing the link to the dream, Benjamin in effect claims this quality for Eingedenken as well. But he also prepares the ground for a moment of interruption, for in a broader historical perspective the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century is depicted as a nightmarish state of dreaming, and in relation to this Eingedenken will figure as the decisive instrument of awakening.

In addition to the dream, a second altered mental state which Benjamin invokes as a reference point for his notion of Eingedenken is the state of intoxication or rapture (das Rausch). Actually, this is presented as a direct elaboration of the same theme, for on several occasions Benjamin employs “Traum” and “Rausch” interchangeably, which is to say that the dream is presented as a specific instance of the broader phenomenon of rapturous states of mind. To build a bridge between Eingedenken and the phenomenon of intoxication, then, Benjamin employs the same basic technique as was witnessed above in

111 In his 1939 Baudelaire essay, Benjamin attributes the recognition of the auratic character of dreaming to Valéry, who is quoted to the following effect: “To say ‘Here I see such and such an object’ does not establish an equation between me and the object. ... In dreams, however, there is an equation. The things I see, see me just as much as I see them” (GS I:647, III.:188 f.).

112 This usage is evident, e.g., in the Surrealism essay of 1929: “In the world’s structure dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication ...” (GS II:297, Refl.:179, emphasis added).
connection with the dream: he describes experiences of intoxication in a manner which closely parallels his conceptualization of involuntary memory. A striking example of this is found in the piece on *Hashish in Marseilles* which opens with a citation from a medical journal describing the effect of cannabis in terms that could be applied verbatim to Eingedenken in its ecstatic moment:

> One of the first signs that hashish is beginning to take effect ‘is a dull feeling of foreboding; something strange, ineluctable is approaching ... images and chains of images, long-submerged memories appear, whole scenes and situations are experienced ...’ (GS IV:409, Refl.:137)

Since comparisons of this nature only involve the first moment of Benjamin’s concept of Eingedenken, it may be anticipated from the outset that they cannot stand alone. While the ecstatic aspect of memory serves as a means of gaining access to the unconscious, of integrating events, establishing connections that are not immediately apparent and detecting unsuspected meaning in events that we have otherwise become accustomed to regarding with indifference, it stands in danger - just like drug-induced intoxication or, for that matter, the state of dreaming - of degenerating into a self-contained process that removes those indulging in it from the realm of contemporary social and political interaction. Thus, while ecstatic remembrance involves a potential for freeing creative resources and fostering agency, it also involves a risk of coopting those very resources in an unproductive, reactionary manner. This is reflected in the fact that every altered mental state with which Benjamin associates the ecstatic moment of Eingedenken is thematized elsewhere in his work as inherently ambiguous. We shall return to this theme at the end of the present chapter where a more general review of Benjamin’s critique of intoxication, and by
implication of “anamnestic escapism,” forms a transition to the second moment of Eingedenken.

**The Proustian influence**

Adorno reports that Benjamin “wanted not to read a single line more of Proust than he had to translate, for otherwise he would slide into an addictive dependence that would hinder ... his own production” (McCole 1993:253).

If the preliminary description of Eingedenken presented above evokes associations to Proust, this is no coincidence. Benjamin’s notion of ungewolltes or unwillkürliches Eingedenken was, by all indications, originally modeled on Proust’s *memoire involontaire*, and in many key passages the two concepts of memory are treated as synonymous. As a general pattern, Benjamin develops his most important and original philosophical insights though a commentary on other authors, and when it comes to the theme of memory Proust is without a doubt his most important source of influence. Nevertheless, the relationship between Benjaminian and Proustian memory proves to be a complicated one. Much as Benjamin was strongly influenced by Proust and experienced a certain personal affinity with the great novelist (cf. McCole 1993:253), he is clearly ambivalent about Proust’s politics. This is not simply a matter of disagreement about the application of an otherwise neutral concept. Quite the contrary, Benjamin is from the earliest phases of his encounter with Proust on guard against the political implications of aligning himself directly with the notion of mémoire involontaire, and in the process of working this dilemma out, he departs
quite radically from the Proustian model on several counts.

A central factor making it difficult to pinpoint the precise moment of divergence between the two cognate approaches to reconceptualizing memory is that Benjamin rarely announces his differences with Proust openly. Throughout the 1930s (indeed as late as the 1939 Baudelaire study), he continues to use Eingedenken and mémoire involontaire interchangeably, yet he imperceptibly strains the latter concept by linking up Proust’s themes and observations with his own philosophical concerns and by employing Proustian phrases and ideas in unsuspected ways, attributing to them a significance that exceeds the novelist’s horizon of thought. According to John McCole, Benjamin goes so far as to “ascrib[e] his own revision of Proust to Proust himself” (McCole 1993:265). “Instead of declaring their differences openly, ... he attributed his own view to Proust” (ibid.:263). This conforms with what I have earlier called a strategy of mimetic intervention. In light of the intricate pattern of identification, distancing, and implicit conceptual subversion that this involves, my approach in the following will be to follow Proust’s lead as far as possible and elucidate the main features of Eingedenken through a direct comparison with the mémoire involontaire. Like Benjamin, I will initially treat the two concepts as more or less synonymous but will continually make a point of highlighting the strain that is placed on the central Proustian motifs when incorporated into Benjamin’s conceptual framework. By pushing the analogy between the two authors to the point where it breaks, it becomes possible to identify the key points of difference between them and in this manner also to pinpoint the distinctive character of Benjamin’s conceptual intervention in the philosophy of memory. Without foreclosing this investigation, it may be anticipated in advance that
Benjamin's \textit{immanent critique} of Proust becomes especially pronounced in connection with the themes of rupture and awakening (pertaining to what I call the second and third moments of Eingedenken), which are also prefigured by the great novelist but which to Benjamin have a political significance that is alien to Proust.

Before turning explicitly to the philosophy of memory, it will be helpful to form a general overview of the various dimensions of Benjamin's complicated relation to Proust. I propose for the sake of clarity that it is possible to identify a limited number of distinct moments in Benjamin's Proust reception, i.e. a small number of core observations and assessments that display a certain inner progression towards a synthesizing interpretation, yet which can also stand on their own as different registers that Benjamin freely switches between in his response to Proust. In a very preliminary manner, I wish to draw attention to the following six moments or registers:

1. Proust is, like his narrator Marcel, undeniably a \textit{snob} - in Benjamin's words "an insignificant snob, a fanciful, played-out salon lion" (GS II:314 in McCole's translation, McCole 1993:256; compare Ill.:205). He is politically conservative and limits his social observations and commentary almost exclusively to the concerns of the leisured class. For this reason \textit{A la recherche} has generally been repugnant to the Marxist left. Benjamin disagrees with this assessment on literary grounds but makes no attempt to deny or excuse the underlying charge of snobbery. To the contrary, it may be surmised that this accounts for a moment of uneasiness that is everywhere latent in Benjamin's Proust readings.
2. While politically reactionary, Benjamin also notes that Proust is a painfully honest writer, so although he shows no open disloyalty to his class, he in effect exposes the degeneration of the aristocracy and the high bourgeoisie - paradoxically by cultivating in himself the vices of snobbery and flattery. In the second part of *The Image of Proust*, Benjamin goes so far as to accredit the novelist with unmasking the conspiracy of the privileged elite "which is everywhere pledged to camouflage its material basis" (GS I:319, Ill.:210). "There was something of the detective in Proust’s curiosity. The upper ten thousand were to him a clan of criminals, a band of conspirators beyond compare: the Camorra of consumers. It excludes from its world everything that has a part in production" (ibid., Ill.:209).113

3. Extending the above assessment from the economic realm to the more general depiction of social conditions, Benjamin treats Proust’s writing as symptomatic of what I have called the phenomenology of modernity. Thus, although casting himself

113 Compare an earlier passage, where Benjamin states: "It is obvious that the problems of Proust’s characters are those of a satiated society. But there is not one which would be identical with those of the author, which are subversive. To reduce this to a formula, it was to be Proust’s aim to design the entire structure of society as a physiology of chatter" (GS I:315, Ill.:206). Working within a framework of Marxist (or post-Marxist) literary analysis, Michael Sprinkler has developed a sustained and detailed argument to much the same effect, i.e. that “it is by no means clear that the Recherche is entirely on the side of the bourgeoisie” (Sprinkler 1994:4). In this connection Sprinkler takes issue both with the charge of political conservatism as an assumed reflection of class loyalties and with Gide’s critique of Proust’s alleged "dissimulation," in other words, his alleged latent homophobia and antisemitism (ibid. 121ff.). In the concluding section of the study, Sprinkler picks up on Benjamin’s Proust reading as seminal on account of its early recognition of Proust “as a man who [was] ahead of his class” (ibid.:181, citing Ill.:210) and who took a stance “against the voice of [his] own class-consciousness” (ibid.: 224, n.28, with reference to GS II:1054).
as a chronicler of the waning nineteenth century, Proust is more effective than almost any other writer of his age in exposing the dysphoric traits of the condition of modernity, including the ambiguous impact of technology. This approach to Proust, which lies at the heart of Benjamin’s fascination with *A la recherche du temps perdu*, is epitomized in a footnote to *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* where Benjamin suggests that “[t]he deterioration of experience manifests itself in Proust in the complete realization of his ultimate intention” (GS I:643n, III.:200, n15).

4. Underlying Proust’s ability to expose the secret plight of his class and his age lies, needless to say, the disciplined effort of a great author and a great mind. Benjamin is unwavering in his recognition of Proust’s literary and philosophical qualities and not only attributes these to an exceptional personal accomplishment but views them as indicative of the terms of artistic creation under contemporary circumstances. In this light it is not only the world depicted by Proust but the figure of the author himself, his alienation from society and peculiarities as an artist, his genre and literary successes and failures, that come down to us as symptomatic of the modern condition. Benjamin accentuates this point by singling out “the image of Proust” as “the highest physiognomic expression which the irresistibly growing discrepancy between literature and life was able to assume” (GS I:311, III.:202).

5. The observation that there is something exemplary - if not always praiseworthy (“musterhaft,” GS II:311, III.:201) - about Proust as a writer and thinker leads to the
further observation that his basic modus operandi, the mémoire involontaire, takes on the character of an indispensable intellectual and political force. What in Proust serves as a vehicle for artistic creation comes to Benjamin to serve as a general model for relating to the past, i.e. for a certain mode of historical awareness that can be mobilized in new social and political settings, far beyond Proust's elitist social universe.

6. But even given the ambition to harness Proustian memory for a different cause, there is, on Benjamin's interpretation, still something deeply ambiguous and unsatisfactory about this intellectual force, still a regressive moment that is not attributable merely to its application. So to the extent that the mémoire involontaire is to serve as a model for a radicalized historical awareness, this will have to happen with an element of serious caution. In a nutshell, Benjamin's central concern is to resist the temptation of settling for an anamnestic reconciliation with an unfulfilled past and thus of construing remembrance merely as a means of compensation (Ersatz) in a complementary world - like Proust retreating into the world of his own memories. This is a risk to any thinker who highlights the ecstatic aspect of remembrance, such as Proust in connection with the mémoire involontaire and such as Benjamin himself in connection with his conceptualization of Eingedenken. In this manner, Benjamin's critical reception of Proust confronts him with a thrust within his own thinking about memory that he has to mobilize his best intellectual efforts to resist.
Eingedenken as involuntary memory

The most obvious and perhaps also most radical theme that Benjamin adopts from Proust is that Eingedenken is conceived as involuntary memory. Benjamin conveys this quality by interchangeably using the two adjectives "ungewollte" and "unwillkürliche." Neither perfectly captures the French "involontaire;" hence, no doubt, Benjamin's wavering between the two adjectives. But the gliding of meaning that occurs in the translation from French to German should not be viewed merely as an unfortunate, unavoidable circumstance, for although both of Benjamin's chosen adjectives function as approximations of a direct translation of "involontaire," each adds connotations that are not salient in Proust's usage and which allow Benjamin to accentuate certain aspects of his own concept of memory that are either less prominent in or entirely absent from Proust's writing. A further linguistic feature setting Benjamin's notion of memory apart from that of Proust has to do with the connotations of the prefix "Ein". While the prefix may be interpreted in a reflexive sense to signal a "thinking inward" (see, e.g., Schlossman 1988:110), it also carries a transitive meaning, indicating a "thinking into" something else, which I submit prefigures an orientation towards exploding the interiority of remembrance. This will be taken up again below and will be found to mark a crucial aspect of Benjamin's "Auseinandersetzung" with both Proust and Hegel.

The adjective "ungewollte" is a past participle which literally states that a certain act or event has not been willed. The act is, in other words, described as unintentional, accidental, and perhaps directly contrary to one's will or intentions: unwanted. Thus, the
phrase lends the act a somewhat arbitrary character. "Unwillkürliches," which is the adjective Benjamin most often associates with Eingedenken, corrects this. To the German ear this adjective also carries the direct meaning "involuntary," but now with a suggestion of the event obeying a deeper logic or necessity, a necessity beyond the immediate reach of the will. The primary meaning of "Willkür," as well as the derived adjective "willkürlich," is an arbitrary exercise of power. The prefix "un," then, may be taken to signal a negation of both aspects of this meaning such that the event qualified as "unwillkürlich" is neither arbitrary nor the result of a deliberate exercise of power. In some circumstances this implies that the act or event is instinctive; in our present context, however, a more pertinent connotation is that of spontaneity, and the primary implication of the phrase unwillkürliches Eingedenken, accordingly, is that it is a form of memory that occurs spontaneously.

John McCole (in one of the few English-language Benjamin commentaries which seeks to clarify the etymology of Eingedenken)\textsuperscript{114} suggests that the phrase "unwillkürliches Eingedenken" has an in-built paradoxical ring which Proust's mémoire involontaire allegedly does not. His point is that both roots of the phrase, the predicative adjective "eingedenk sein" and the verbal noun "Gedenken," suggest an intentional state of mindfulness which is contradicted by the connotations of "unwillkürlich" (McCole 1993:260). However, I am not convinced that this is so. Definitely one can be mindful of

\textsuperscript{114} Compare, however, Wohlfarth 1978:150ff., where the concept of Eingedenken is elaborated in contrast to the more fleeting Gedächtnis of the storyteller and presented as a form of memory that is "from the outset synonymous with the difficulty of recapturing past time" (ibid.:156). Comay observes that "Benjamin's Eingedenken is no longer strictly one or inward (Ein-) and no longer strictly thought (-Denken). It announces, rather, a mindfulness or vigilance which refuses to take in (or be taken in by) a tradition authorizing itself as the continuity of an essential legacy" (Comay 1994:266).
something in a spontaneous manner - perhaps even in a pre-conscious manner - and this is undoubtedly a connotation that Benjamin is intent upon exploiting. It points to a theme concerning an intricate dialectic of attentiveness and distraction which will be seen to play a central role in Benjamin's analysis of memory, and it conjures up the notion of a past of which we are tacitly aware yet unable to deliberately confront and “domesticate,” i.e. make sense of in memory.

There may, however, be another level of paradoxicality built into the notion of unwillkürliches *Ein*-gedenken. This has to do with the agency of the remembering subject, for whereas the adjective suggests an element of passivity, the transitive prefix “Ein” in the noun forcefully conveys a sense of activity. It may be assumed that this conceptual tension is deliberate on Benjamin's part, for he clearly conceives Eingedenken as a practice, yet the practice of a decentred subject. Ultimately, what is being called into question is the opposition between involuntary and voluntary (as will be further examined in *Chapter 5*).

In Proust, the spontaneous nature of involuntary memory is captured not only in the author’s explicit observations on the phenomenon but also in the vivid description of how the narrator Marcel first experiences it. Initially Marcel encounters mémoire involontaire in a purely *passive* manner as an overwhelming, inexplicable sensation. He comes home tired and weary one night and absentmindedly sits down to sip a cup of herbal tea that his mother puts before him. As he then dunks the famous madeleine cookie into this beverage, he is suddenly overcome by a certain amorphous but extremely strong sensation - a sensation of pleasure and intense well-being that has no apparent connection with the immediate situation. The sensation quickly passes and Marcel tries to recapture and comprehend it, but
he finds that the more he concentrates his attention on the experience, the more elusive it becomes. However, when he relaxes his mental efforts the sensation returns. As he learns to abandon himself to it, he senses that something more specific - an identifiable memory image - is seeking to penetrate to his conscious mind:

I feel something start within me, something that leaves its resting-place and attempts to rise, something that has been embedded like an anchor at a great depth; I do not yet know what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly; I can measure the resistance, I can hear the echo of the great spaces traversed. (Proust 1954, vol 1:49)

By his own volition Marcel is unable to grasp this sensation. He knows it is there but cannot distinguish its form. But then in a dramatic reversal the desired insight comes to him: “suddenly the memory revealed itself” (ibid.:50). In a flash Marcel realizes that the combination of lime blossom tea and madeleine pastry is precisely what his aunt Léonie used to serve him on childhood Sunday mornings during the family’s Easter visits to Combray. This realization transports him back to the universe of the child that he once was and which he had hitherto barely been aware that he carried with him, deeply rooted in his unconscious mind:

And as in the game wherein the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little pieces of paper which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch and twist and take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, solid and recognizable, so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann’s park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea. (ibid.:51)

What is particularly striking about this narrative description of the power of memory, aside
from its immediate dramatic effect, is the fact that an event which is attributed such importance is at the same time presented as involuntary. Toying with deliberate exaggeration, Proust spares no effects in conveying the profound existential, virtually metaphysical, significance of the experience. Already before deciphering the memory image in terms of its content, Marcel has a clear premonition of this. In recounting his first encounter with involuntary memory he notes that "this new sensation ... had the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal" (ibid.:48; emphasis added).

Subsequently in the novel, this effect is brought out by the observation that involuntary memory confronts the subject with his "true self," by the narrative twist that its discovery sets Marcel on a course towards realizing his life ambition of becoming a writer, and by the more general motif that the resurrection of a lost childhood signals the realization of happiness.

However, in pointed contrast to the high expectations invested in involuntary memory, Marcel is skeptical, if not outright cynical about the prospects of attaining them -

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115 See, e.g., vol. III:905f. (emphasis added): "In the observation of the present, where the senses cannot feed it with this food [the essence of things extracted by memory], it [the inner being] languishes, as it does in the consideration of a past made arid by the intellect or in the anticipation of a future which the will constructs with fragments of the present and the past, fragments whose reality it still further reduces by preserving of them only what is suitable for the utilitarian, narrowly human purpose for which it intends them. But let a noise or a scent, once heard or once smelt, be heard or smelt again in the present and at the same time in the past, real without being actual, ideal without being abstract, and immediately the permanent and habitually concealed essence of things is liberated and our true self which seemed - had perhaps for long years seemed - to be dead but was not altogether dead, is awakened and reanimated as it receives the celestial nourishment that is brought to it."
and it remains uncertain, even at the end of *A la recherche*, whether Marcel himself realizes his ambitions. If involuntary memory in Proust’s conception assumes redemptive characteristics, then these belong in a world void of providence, for as Marcel notes, “There is a large element of chance in these matters, and a second chance occurrence, that of our own death, often prevents us from awaiting for any length of time the favours of the first” (ibid.:47). To Benjamin, this is decisive. Among the countless reflections upon the nature of involuntary memory, he singles out the following as the *classicus locus* of Proust’s conception of involuntary memory:

... And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object ... of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance [hasard] whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die. (ibid.:47f.; GS V:509; compare GS I:610)

In Benjamin’s Proust commentaries, one finds a variety of different interpretations of what it means for a memory function that is attributed such profound importance at the same time to be defined as involuntary, spontaneous, and a matter of chance. At one point he sees it simply as “a measure of the difficulty” of resurrecting the past, and in so doing of “restor[ing] the figure of the storyteller to the present generation” (GS I:611, Ill.:159). A more poignant interpretation, however, is that the accidental nature of our ability to “take hold of [our] experience” and connect with our “inner concerns” casts a glaring light on the contemporary structure of experience and on the possibility of exerting agency in the current situation (GS I:610, Ill.:158f.). Viewed in a broad perspective, the spontaneous and

seemingly accidental nature of involuntary memory - and likewise the fact that the past is located outside the self (thus setting the stage for a concept of remembrance as transitive intrusion continually jeopardizing the immanence of subjectivity) - may also be interpreted as a reinforcement of the basic motif permeating Benjamin’s philosophy of history, namely that the past is not universally accessible but nevertheless continues to exert a destabilizing pressure on the present. The concept of memory that Benjamin gleaned from his reading of Proust, accordingly, is, like his concept of materialist historiography, fundamentally about forging *unique constellations* between past and present, and this implies that the past can only be accessed under very specific circumstances and only in defiance of an ever-present possibility of the opportunity being missed.

This latter aspect of the concept of involuntary memory comes out most clearly when viewed in comparison with the contrasting mode of memory that Benjamin, following Proust, describes sometimes simply as “voluntary memory,” sometimes as “the memory of the intellect.”

*The opposition to voluntary memory*

*Voluntary memory*, in Proust’s usage, denotes a familiar form of memory that I have previously referred to as *recall*. This is a utilitarian mode of memory that we continually rely on in the course of our daily existence; it is actually so fundamental to our normal mental functioning that it borders on habit. For our current purposes, I propose to define recall as *the ability to retain and randomly access knowledge* or, in other words, to deliberately make present parceled bits of information obtained in the past. The object of
recall is knowledge that was once before present to the mind and that is now being called back into consciousness. This has an obvious practical use. In everyday life we never cease to rely on retrieving memories as required by the demands of the situation at hand. We thus recall previous experiences, people we have met and places we have been, conversations, things we have heard or read, ideas that we ourselves have formed. From a purely instrumental point of view, this ability enables us to cope in the present. It also allows us to project into the future, to make plans and carry them through. Without memory in this sense, i.e. without an on-going access to past information, there would be no continuity of action in time.

A central feature of the faculty of recall is that it lends itself to being improved through mnemo-techniques and, further, to being aided by external, mechanical devices. By the same token that it is attributed an instrumental function, it may thus itself be thought of as a tool that can be developed, improved, and supplemented by other tools. The invention of writing marks a primordial instance of this technological evolution, and in a contemporary context the personal computer stands as the most recent and most powerful device for the externalization of memory. It has given added impetus and technical force to an already deeply established thrust in the modern era that the French historian of memory Pierre Nora has described as an “explosion of the archive” (Nora 1989:13f.). Concomitant with what Nora calls an “increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good” (ibid.:7), and hence an intensified feeling of disconnectedness with the past, historical societies have been subject to a virtually obsessive historicist impulse to record all conceivable data and events for posterity. In the jargon of artificial intelligence,
this is called committing information to memory. Today the memory of the computer
indisputably stands as one of the most powerful tropes of memory as such, and it is a trope
that gains in plausibility for being consistent with the general conception of memory as the
ability to process parcelled bits of information in an accurate and efficient manner and to
randomly access this information at will.

Master plot: the need to reconceptualize memory

The force and salience of the function of recall notwithstanding, it is also widely
perceived as a shallow form of memory and thus, in a broader perspective, an inadequate
model of what memory is about. As will be seen presently, this is a sentiment shared by
both Proust and Benjamin but it is one with a long tradition in the history of philosophy. In
a famous passage of the Phaedrus (275C), Plato (the first philosopher of the written word)
has the oral philosopher Socrates scornfully denigrate writing as a tool not for remembering
but for reminding. This happens in pointed contrast to anamnesis proper, which in the
Platonic dialogues is identified as integral to the pursuit of truth. Hegel, similarly,
recognizes a mechanical mode of memory analogous to recall. He calls this Gedächtnis,
and although the latter is attributed a central role in the psychology section of the
Encyclopaedia in connection with the analysis of intelligence (§§445-68, notably §§461-3),
the part that it plays in the scheme of Bildung, the master plot of the Phenomenology
whereby the autonomous and fully developed subject comes into its own, is predominantly
Proust conveys a perception of recall, i.e. voluntary memory, as shallow by basing his entire discussion of memory on the artist's experience that memories evoked at will and with the aid of technical devices, although factually accurate, prove to be barren for the purpose of writing. Looking back at his long trajectory of failed literary attempts, Marcel observes that he was actually always capable of recalling events from his distant past, people he had met and places he had been. One might presume that with the help of reminders such as diary notes, souvenirs, and photographs, he could even reconstruct quite detailed sequences and chronologies, but the problem with this manner of reconstructing the past was that it was "without any vividness or attraction." Articulated in terms of a central theme in Benjamin's philosophy of memory (outlined already in the preamble to this study), what characterizes Marcel's anguish is not actually a forgetting in the conventional sense of the word, but rather a neutralization of his past, which is in fact negative.\footnote{As pointed out to me by Rebecca Comay, the capacity for Gedächtnis - recitation by rote without comprehension - is a defining feature of Hegel's notion of the "Unhappy Consciousness," which is elaborated in the Phenomenology of Spirit at the individual level in Chapter IV and at the level of spirit in Chapter VI. However, since this shape epitomizes spirit in its state of alienation, the role assigned to Gedächtnis only confirms the importance of the capacity for interiorizing remembrance - Erinnerung - for the process of the subject coming into its own.}

\footnote{Proust, ""In Search of Lost Time" - An Interview with Elie-Joseph Bois," reproduced in Shattuck 1974:165-71. Compare Proust 1983, vol. I:48: "I must own that I could have assured any questioner that Combray did include other scenes and did exist at other hours than these. But since the facts which I should then have recalled would have been prompted only by voluntary memory, the memory of the intellect, and since the pictures which that kind of memory shows us preserve nothing of the past itself, I should never have had any wish to ponder over this residue of Combray. To me it was in reality all dead."}
consistent with certain modes of remembering.\(^{119}\) Being set upon a literary career, Marcel stands in need of a qualitatively different kind of memory - a memory which can serve him as a muse or, in other words, a memory capable of actualizing the past. The story of how this is found is the closest one comes to a unified plot of the novel; at the same time it is the source and precondition of the novel being written - which is to say that *A la recherche du temps perdu* is essentially a work about its own becoming based on the discovery of a new mode of memory.

This is the official narrative, as it were. Upon closer examination one finds that Proust's examples of involuntary memory often do rely on the deliberate use of external triggers and therefore come to closely resemble the working of voluntary memory.\(^ {120}\) In a certain sense this is not surprising, for as a writer of modernity it would be more strange if Proust could avoid any reliance on technology, much as he seeks to escape it. The upshot of this, ultimately, is that the very distinction between voluntary and involuntary becomes difficult to uphold, and we shall accordingly find that Benjamin systematically seeks to dismantle it while at the same time resisting the historicist thrust of a technologization of memory (historicist in the sense of facilitating a compensatory quest for universal retention

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\(^{119}\) On a variation of the same theme, Marcel observes in one of his most reflexive and insightful moments that what wounded him even more deeply than the loss of his dearest childhood sweetheart (Gilberte) was the gradual waning of the anguish of the loss. This might be construed as an extreme case of sentimentality, but the example also captures an important aspect of the dynamic of neutralization in so far as Marcel's anguish ultimately concerns the loss of connectedness with his own past.

\(^{120}\) At an even more fundamental level, the instability of the opposition between voluntary and involuntary in Proust is indicated by the very title of his magnum opus invoking a - volitional?, active? - "search" (recherche) for lost time.
and immediate accessibility. But this belongs to a later stage of conceptual development. At the present juncture we may still take the conceptual opposition between voluntary and involuntary memory at face value, and given this we find that Benjamin actually projects a master plot quite similar to that of Proust.

To Benjamin, too, the social and experiential context for rethinking memory is one of forgetting and neutralization, and the reduction of memory to a formula of technologically enhanced recall has a decisive share in this. According to the master plot supplied in On the Concept of History just prior to the author's death in 1940, voluntary memory may be viewed as historicist both in the sense of treating the past as inertly available, in the sense of constituting an - ostensibly - objective perspective on the past, and in the sense of facilitating teleological projections in to a future which in the end merely legitimates the present. In all of these respects the drive to preserve the past has a pacifying, narcotic function. Occasionally Benjamin registers this in a distinctly Proustian manner with reference to the impact on the creative faculty: "The perpetual readiness of volitional, discursive memory, encouraged by the technique of mechanical reproduction, reduces the scope for the play of the imagination" (GS I:645, Ill.:186). But in a historiographical context the neutralization of the past also marks a betrayal of the experience of past generations. Both observations confront us with the need for a different concept of memory; like that solicited by Proust's narrator, it has to be one which can rejuvenate and actualize the past and thereby activate the present - and in so doing also honour the claim which past generations have on the present. Approached from the angle of Benjamin's analysis of the structure of experience, it is possible to arrive at a similar conclusion. The picture that
emerges here is that the characteristic bipolarity in the structure of contemporary experience in turn calls for a two-tiered concept of memory - or perhaps better, a reduplication of the concept of memory - such that the concept of intentional, conscious memory which operates along a horizontal axis of diachronical continuity needs to be supplemented by a mode of memory which can intersect this axis and forge access to experiences that are not accessible to ordinary consciousness. Recall alone provides no stronghold against the leveling of experience that Benjamin acknowledges forms part of the phenomenology of modernity. In fact, its ascendance as the paradigm mode of remembrance is part and parcel of the very process of social forgetting underlying this process, since it is premised on an entire dimension of experience being shut out.

**The object of involuntary memory**

A further way of getting at the distinctive character of involuntary memory, in particular in comparison with voluntary memory, is to examine the two contrasting modes of memory in terms of their respective objects. This is a question which has already been touched upon on several occasions but without any clear determination. Therefore, it needs to be asked: what exactly is the object of Eingedenken? How does it relate to the object of voluntary memory? Are the two forms of memory coextensive in the sense of being qualitatively different ways of relating to the same facts and events in the past, or are they also distinguished by relating to a different set of perceptions, sensations, and experiences?

Prima facie, this is a matter of some ambiguity and it would appear that Proust and Benjamin adopt directly opposing stances on the matter. Given the suggestion that the
narrator Marcel during the period of his literary hiatus was actually capable of recalling many of the events in his past that were subsequently to form the core substance of his involuntary memories (notably his childhood excursions to Combray), one might be justified in assuming that the two modes of memory are essentially coextensive. Benjamin, however, produces an argument for why this cannot be the case. By associating the phenomenon of involuntary memory with Freud's theory of shock, he reserves it for a range of experiences that never entered the register of conscious memory in the first place and therefore are inaccessible to volitional recall. Although these appear to be incompatible accounts of the relation between voluntary and involuntary memory, I believe they are not necessarily so when properly construed. The opposition dissolves when it is recognized that the object of involuntary memory is not an isolated event in its bare facticity. Unlike voluntary memory, involuntary memory is therefore not susceptible to the simple binary alternative of truth or falsity (as is always in focus, e.g., when memory is brought up in a forensic context). To the contrary, its object always reveals a certain amorphous, dense quality. Benjamin makes this point directly with reference to of Proust. He states that “anyone who wishes to surrender knowingly to the innermost overtones in this work must place himself in a special stratum - the bottom-most - of this involuntary memory, one in which the materials of memory no longer appear singly, as images, but tell us about a whole, amorphously and formlessly, indefinitely and weightily, in the same way as the weight of his net tells a fisherman about his catch” (GS I:323ff., III.:214.).

But how to reconcile this notion of an amorphous memory object with the

observation that involuntary memory often does seem to relate to and confront us with specific events and does appear to us “singly, as images”? Many of Proust’s examples of involuntary memory as it occurs in the course of the novel are precisely of such a nature that they could be subject to voluntary memory, even if this would present them in a less vivid and capturing form. The same would appear to be true of Benjamin’s notion of Erlebnisse that defy being assimilated to Erfahrung. The paradigm example of the soldiers in the trenches of World War I displays an exceedingly determinate character. Although Benjamin does not explicitly employ the language of traumatic experiences, this would certainly qualify as one, and irrespective of how difficult it may be to confront, it is entirely concrete. But it is at the same time more than a specific, identifiable event that might be processed in the manner of voluntary memory, and in this respect it retains an amorphous character.

A vivid description of the range of involuntary memory is found towards the end of Proust’s novel, in the book called *Time Regained*, where the aging Marcel has several experiences in rapid succession of a type of memory which restores to him the presence of his past. Stumbling over a cobblestone recalls a sensation of being in Venice long ago, the stiffness of a napkin takes him back to the sea-side resort at Balbec where he spent a summer with his grandmother (and where he first met Albertine, his most lasting love), a spoon knocking accidentally against a plate restores before his mind’s eye a beautiful French country-side which he recently caught a glimpse of from a train carriage, the hissing of water running through a pipe once again reproduces an image of Balbec, and absent-mindedly picking up a book by George Sand in the Prince de Guermantes’ library revives a painful moment of his early childhood when his mother spent the night by his side comforting him and reading from this very novel. Each of these experiences comes to Marcel as a pleasurable sensation (in striking contrast to the original experience, which was usually characterized by anxiety, disappointment, and sometimes even despair), but it must be noted that there are also negative examples of involuntary memory - or should one rather say that all instances of involuntary memory also involve an unsettling aspect? One of Proust’s most graphic illustrations of this is found in the figure of the aging Swann being plagued by images of Odette’s infidelity.
Herein, I believe, lies the answer to the question concerning the object of involuntary memory. Both Benjamin and Proust orient their concepts of memory towards a level of experience that involves a *surplus* in comparison with what can be registered by consciousness. Benjamin announces this openly by describing the experience defying experience as monstrous (ungeheuer; GS II:214). The soldiers of the Great War remained silent, on this interpretation, because any details that they might recount would fail to convey the experience itself. Proust, for his part, makes no explicit link between the mémoire involontaire and the phenomenon of shock, but he arguably conveys a related notion in his description of the intensity with which Marcel as a child absorbs impressions and events. Some of the most intense experiences depicted by Proust are actually not of outwardly dramatic events at all (such tend always to be anti-climactic in Proust's rendition) but rather of nature and of people. Marcel registers the world around him in a virtually ecstatic manner which might, in keeping with the Freudian motif adopted by Benjamin, be described as perception in a state of shock. It is a manner of perception which always absorbs more than enters the register of conscious memory, and this surplus is what resurfaces in the subsequent act of involuntary remembrance.

This interpretation, in summary, presents involuntary memory as a memory of something which exceeds memory, of a level of experience that cannot be essentialized in the manner of Hegelian Erinnerung, or, to hark back to the *Preamble* of the present study, of the "Etwas" that the writing on the wall of my Danish World War II bunker alleged had been forgotten. The next step in our reconstruction of the concept of Eingedenken will be to more closely investigate Benjamin's manner of accessing this.
Decentred subjectivity

It is at the present juncture opportune to take a step back and gauge some of the broader implications of Benjamin’s intervention in the philosophy of memory. In Chapter 3 we were presented with an analysis of the phenomenology of modernity according to which a constant exposure to shock factors generates a pattern of experiential bipolarity and leaves an entire level of experience inaccessible to ordinary consciousness. In the present chapter, we have been tracing a concept of memory that displays a pronounced ecstatic quality, in particular in being presented as a mental flow analogous to the dream and to certain states of intoxication. Clearly, there is a close correlation between these two thematic clusters, the obvious connection being that Eingedenken is conceived as a form of memory that can forge access to experience registered in a state of shock. Employing a distinction made in connection with Benjamin’s phenomenology of modernity, this may be viewed as an intervention along the vertical axis of experience, i.e. a submersion into a dimension of depth which, interestingly, mirrors the anamnestic ascension of the Platonic philosopher to the realm of pure ideas but reverses the direction.

Strategically, the response developed here to the disintegrating impact upon modern subjectivity by a continuous exposure to shock presents yet another example of Benjamin’s characteristic strategy of mimetic intervention. This pattern is especially pronounced if one considers the manner in which both memory and the phenomenology of modernity implicate the faculty of volition. What we find is, on the one hand, that contemporary social experience is characterized by a heightened strain on volitional control, but then
Benjamin's anamnestic response to this situation, on the other hand, resolutely revolves around a concept of memory which too is essentially identified as involuntary. As we shall see in Chapter 5, Benjamin goes as far as to extend this line of reasoning to a quest for a concept of involuntary practice.

It is arguable that the mimetic strategy outlined here is already charted by Proust. Although one finds no sustained analytical reflection on the phenomenon, a strong case could be made that a socially pervasive weakness of the will - what the ancient Greeks called *akrasia* and the Mediaeval philosophers *incontinentia* - forms one of the primary underlying themes of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. It is established as a leitmotif of the novel in the "primary scene" recounted in the *Overture* (where the child Marcel is granted a night in the company of his mother precisely due to his nervous inability to control himself) and is then subsequently taken up in countless variations throughout the novel, with different aspects of the phenomenon being distributed over numerous different characters (Charlus, St. Loup, etc.). It is therefore not without precedence that the central cognitive faculty around which Proust structures his reclaiming of experience is characterized as involuntary.

Needless to say, this is not the place to substantiate the above interpretation of Proust. I merely wish to suggest it as a possibility which furnishes a clue to the puzzle, indicated at the beginning of my investigation of the concept of Eingedenken, that the basic idea of remembrance as an ecstatic practice is consistent with common experience yet all but disregarded in the classical philosophical literature on memory. Why is this? My suggestion is that it is because the destabilizing moment of involuntary memory is
incompatible with the way that the practice of memory is generally seen to affect, and reflect upon, the remembering subject. From Plato to Hegel - and beyond - memory is predominantly associated with an upward motion for several important reasons. One is that it is recognized to be intimately connected with the pursuit of truth. This, of course, is contested by a powerful trend in the history of philosophy that regards the faculty of memory as an unreliable source of knowledge. A case in point is Aristotelian thinking, another the Rationalists, but what characterizes both of these schools of philosophy is that their scepticism concerning the faculty of memory is a verdict on how well memory functions rather than on the nature of memory itself. They are therefore as uninclined as the schools of philosophy attributing a central cognitive function to memory to develop a positive concept of ecstatic, involuntary remembrance. (Benjamin, to the contrary, retains the motif of remembrance as a vehicle of truth but revises the concept of truth itself so as to be consistent with the ecstatic moment of Eingedenken. How this happens will be further explored below in connection with an examination of the notion of the dialectical image.)

A second fundamental assumption that gets in the way of developing a positive concept of involuntary memory is that remembrance is presumed to be an effort of concentration. Viewed as a mental faculty, memory is seen as a power of the rational subject which may be more or less reliable, but the critical point is that when it functions well, its results are invariably viewed as an accomplishment associated with intention and volition, i.e. not as an involuntary occurrence that overtakes the subject.\(^\text{123}\) This premise is

\(^\text{123}\) An analogous "block" is identified by Benjamin in connection with a comment on the inability of Proust's readers to recognize the author's "blind, senseless, frenzied quest for happiness" ("unsinnige und besessene Glücksverlangen," GS I:312, III.:203). Why
further reflected in the general usefulness attributed to memory in connection with
purposive action.

A third prevalent assumption associating memory and the will is that memory
functions as *a faculty integrating the self*. This is reflected in the etymology of several of
the concepts with which we have been working. Thus the English words "re-collection" and
"re-membrance" both immediately imply an integration of disparate moments of the self
and the German "Er-innerung," similarly, implies a reflexivity that is centered on the self-
affirmative power of the integrated subject. Hegel's concept of Erinnerung, as we have
seen, powerfully exploits this set of connotations and comes down to us as the most
elaborate articulation of the integrative, centripetal aspect of memory. But the basic idea
that memory in some way or another serves to integrate the self has many other proponents
in the history of philosophy as well. The role of remembrance in St. Augustine's
Confessions (namely as a vehicle of conversion) would be a case in point. John Locke
approaches the same link from a different angle in the well-known theorem that memory -
much more effectively than material or immaterial substance - accounts for the identity of
the person. This is not to be taken in the contemporary sense that our conception of self is
shaped by the individual and communal events that fill our memory but rather in the sense
that memory as such indicates a continuity of consciousness and that this, in turn,
constitutes coherent, continuous subjectivity.

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is this, Benjamin asks, and suggests the answer that it is because beauty - a consummate
work of literature or art - is assumed, like memory in my analysis, to result from an effort of
concentration. It is assumed, in other words, to be "a fruit of toil." The idea that happiness
could have a share in this, Benjamin notes, "would be too much of a good thing, something
their *ressentiment* could never get over" (GS I:313, III:204).
Nietzsche, too, may be mentioned in the present company. Despite (or perhaps because of) his characteristic ambiguity about both historicity and subjectivity, he has a keen eye for the function of memory as a tool for disciplining the subject. In *The Genealogy of Morals* he poses the question of what it took “to breed an animal with the right to make promises” (2.1; Nietzsche 1956:189). The same basic question is rephrased as one of the “genesis of responsibility” (2.2; ibid.:190), or the genesis of the “autonomous, more than moral individual,” the “fully emancipated man, master of his will” (2.2; ibid.:191). What this all boils down to, according to Nietzsche’s argument, is a question of memory: “How does one create a memory for the human animal?” (2.3; ibid.:192). The answer, in turn, is found in the plethora of cruel practices invented by humanity ranging from barbaric punishments to religious asceticism. By Nietzsche’s description, the history of mnemotechniques is essentially one of “torture, blood, sacrifice” (2.3; ibid.:193), but “[b]y such methods the individual was finally taught to remember five or six ‘I wont’s’” (2.3; ibid.:194).

What distinguishes Nietzsche from the other thinkers mentioned here is that the concept of memory developed in the present context is not a normative one. Rather than recommend or disclaim a particular function of memory, Nietzsche’s focus in the second book of *The Genealogy of Morals* is analytical and consists in demonstrating how memory has functioned as what Foucault would call a normalizing power. It serves a blatantly repressive function but is, in one of the brilliant dialectical insights that time and again surfaces in Nietzsche’s thinking, at the same time identified as a condition of possibility for the realization of autonomous subjectivity, for learning from experience, following up on
earlier commitments and projects, making plans and carrying them through. The upshot of this diagnosis of memory, however, is that Nietzsche too is blind to the notion of a memory decentring the subject. This, therefore, is where Benjamin, following Proust, adopts a radically new point of departure in the philosophy of memory. Rather than resisting the experience of modernity, his intervention consists in unrelentingly seeking to push beyond it.

Critique of the ecstatic moment

By adopting a radicalized strategy of immanent critique, Benjamin breaks new ground in the philosophy of memory. His manner of picking up on the ecstatic quality of the Proustian mémoire involontaire is integral to this. And yet there is an inherent ambiguity in Benjamin’s assessment of the ecstatic moment of Eingedenken which, too, needs to be brought out. In a remark upon Proust’s practice of abandoning himself to the currents of his memory, Benjamin observes that the writer’s self-absorption “has as its center a loneliness which pulls the world down into its vortex with the force of a maelstrom” (GS I:321, Ill.:212, emphasis added). What is remarkable about this is that while the image of a vortex accentuates the moment of destabilization that is so markedly a feature of involuntary memory, it also in its own peculiar way indicates a centering of the subject. The vortex can be viewed as both a centrifugal and a centripetal force, and in the present context it is clearly the latter that Benjamin is intent upon confronting. Thus, he conjures up an image of the remembering subject responding to its own experience of being
decentred by objective social forces by constituting itself as a centripetal centre which sucks everything into itself without giving anything back. In this manner, remembrance is attributed an extreme immanence by which it takes on a regressive, proto-escapist quality. Instead of exposing an irresistible objective undermining of autonomous subjectivity, it merely becomes a vehicle for the lonely self to close in on itself.\(^{124}\)

As yet another one-sided response to the phenomenology of modernity, this is an aberration of remembrance which is no less destructive than the moment of a centrifugal scattering. On Benjamin's analysis it is an intrinsic danger, not only to Proust's nostalgic search for lost time but to any agenda of ecstatic liberation. Since his own conceptualization of Eingedenken has an important stake in this, the critique of ecstatic self-indulgence serves first and foremost as a vehicle of dialectical self-critique. This is very much what is at stake in Benjamin's critique of intoxication as unfolded in his encounter with Surrealism, for while the latter targets a level of aesthetic experience that is different from the Proustian mémoire involontaire, both display a cognate tendency to slip back into the very structures of subjective immanence that they strive to escape.

Viewed in the present context, it is obvious that a primary appeal of the Surrealist movement to Benjamin was its commitment to the revival of a level of experience that both exceeds and unhinges the ordinary. Such experience was attributed a pronounced ecstatic character which at the level of aesthetic theory is reflected in the abandonment of the

\(^{124}\) As indicated earlier, Pensky associates this introversion anamnestic thrust with the trope of brooding, also a form of remembrance, but one which leads to the Tiefsinn of pure subjectivity (Pensky 1996:170ff.). In On the Concept of History, Benjamin attributes the same saddening, paralyzing effect to the historicist method of immersing oneself in the past through a method of empathy (GS I:696, III.:256, thesis 7).
reflexive, self-identical subject as the author of the work of art. Techniques such as automatic writing, accordingly, mobilize the ecstatic moment as a creative practice. The concomitant danger facing the Surrealists, however, was one of lingering in the ecstatic experience, or, in other words, of constituting the latter as self-sufficient rather than seeing it as an event pointing beyond itself. In effect, this marks a variation of the vitalist theme of de-linking the two moments of experience by constituting Erlebnis directly as Erfahrung. A similar observation could be made in reference to the Surrealist revolt against autonomous art (art for art’s sake). While potentially a progressive intervention releasing the resources of aesthetics into the political arena – “winning the powers of intoxication for the revolution” – it risks degenerating into a revolt merely for its own sake which is no longer distinguishable from the aestheticism against which it was conceived. Benjamin summarizes his hesitation about the Surrealist revolt in the charge that they were hampered by an “inadequate, undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication” (GS II:307, Refl.:189).125

Benjamin’s essential answer to the problem of intoxication as escapist interiority consists in insisting on conceptualizing the ecstatic event as exoteric, i.e. as an event, firmly situated in the public sphere, which exceeds the limits of individual experience. This leads

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125 According to Pensky, the Surrealist commitment to an “overcoming of private subjectivity through a protocol of intoxication” accounts “not only [for] the powerful attraction that surrealism had for Benjamin but [for] its limit as well” (Pensky 1996:181). The Surrealist approach to a “‘sign reading’ of cultural artifacts” as a means of subverting bourgeois interiority “resulted more in the concealment of the brooding subject than in its elimination” (ibid.). Therefore, “Benjamin’s worries that surrealism may have reverted to [a] romantic tradition, that it might lose its singular ‘dialectical optic’ by staying back into the ‘damp backroom of spiritualism’ (GS II:298), proved, in the end, more than justified” (ibid.:182).
him to articulate a notion of profane illumination (GS II:297, Refl.:179), thus reaffirming the affinity between the notion of a "higher experience" and theology that was established in his earliest works while at the same time pointing to the need to conceptualize this in an revised, "secularized" form. He contends that this aspiration was shared by the Surrealists but not realized due to their one-sided emphasis on the ecstatic moment of experience: "profane illumination did not always find the Surrealists equal to it, or to themselves, and the very writings that proclaim it most powerfully, Argon's incomparable Paysan de Paris and Breton's Nadja, show very disturbing symptoms of deficiency" (GS II:297, Refl.:179). McCole glosses Benjamin's position vis a vis Surrealism in the following manner: "The point was not to revel in the ecstasy of a complementary world but to return with a sharpened sense for the realities of the world that lies this side of the charmed circle" (McCole 1993:226).

Extended to the field of memory, the upshot of Benjamin's critique of Surrealist intoxication is that the tropes of submersion and decentring need to be reconfigured. An important indication of how this might happen - and thus of how the notion of profane illumination might be taken up in connection with memory - is found in a passage where Benjamin reviews the prose piece Spazieren in Berlin by his friend and co-translator of Proust, Franz Hessel. As in the commentary on Proust, memory is again depicted as a downward motion unhinging the self, but what is now brought out more clearly is that this is fundamentally a matter of exceeding the limits of individual experience. At the conceptual level, Benjamin has already laid the ground for this by identifying a moment of excess in the experience of shock and therefore in the object of Eingedenken. The fact that
this invariably reappears to meet the remembering author decisively points beyond conceptualizing memory as a retreat into self-absorption. Whereas Proust nevertheless continually gravitates back towards such an anamnestic retreat, Hessel, on Benjamin’s reading, brings out the exoteric aspect of involuntary remembrance by depicting the meandering of the lonely stroller in the city as a submersion into a past where the subject is no longer restricted by the boundaries of individuation:

It [memory, the muse] leads the way along the streets, every one of which is sloped steeply downwards. It leads down ... into a past that can be all the more enchanting in that it is not only the author’s own, private past. In the asphalt, over which he walks, his steps elicit an astonishing resonance. The gaslight, which shines on the pavement below, throws an ambiguous light over this double ground. The city as a mnemonic device of the solitary stroller calls up more than his childhood and youth, more than its own history. (GS III:194, emphasis added)

The line of criticism developed here could, in effect, be extended to any self-sufficient ecstatic agenda. It applies to Proust’s anamnestic self-confrontation, and in fact also to Benjamin’s own notion of Eingedenken given the prominence of its ecstatic moment. Needless to say, this is not the final word on Eingedenken (nor on the Proustian mémoire involontaire!), but it is a necessary point to be made in order to expose certain possible implications of the concept that the author himself must be on guard against. The general maxim emerging from Benjamin’s critique of Surrealism, in summary, is that intoxication in any form can only provide a propaedeutic for genuine profane illumination (GS II:297, Refl.:179). Structurally speaking this is interesting, because contrary to common perception the ecstatic experience is presented by Benjamin as a preparation, perhaps even a precondition, for sobriety. Understood in this manner, the ecstatic moment points beyond
itself, yet remains integral to the attainment of its conceptual counterpart, namely a dialectical notion of sobriety. Such is Benjamin's transition to the second moment of Eingedenken. As a practice of the decentred subject, its underlying thrust will be a pattern of "seizing the involuntary."
Chapter 5

Seizing the involuntary

Towards a concept of Eingedenken as practice

In accordance with the maxim that thinking involves not only a flow but also its arrest (thesis 17), the ecstatic moment of Eingedenken needs to be countered by a moment which interrupts and in a certain sense reverses the direction of the former. The overriding concern of the present chapter is to probe this transition and thereby take the reconstruction of Benjamin's concept of Eingedenken a decisive step further. The actual moment of interruption - which in contrast to the association of ecstatic remembrance with dreaming will be designated the moment of awakening - will not be explicitly addressed until the next chapter where the main focus will be on exploiting the power of what Benjamin calls the dialectical image. Prior to this, our focus will be on expanding the understanding of involuntary remembrance and specifying ways in which it is constituted as a deliberate practice. This endeavour is closely connected with Benjamin's commitment to rethinking the structure of subjectivity. Key to understanding the significance that Benjamin attributes
to the Proustian flow and the possibility this entails of accessing the unconscious mind is a firm conviction that the ecstatic experience is not merely an irrational, arbitrary event. The unconscious mind obeys a logic of its own, and a primary purpose of Benjamin's intervention in the philosophy of memory has to do with deciphering this logic and to some extent mastering it, or at least harnessing it as a political force.

The idea of seizing the involuntary is unmistakably a Proustian theme. Although the mémoire involontaire is initially experienced as a spontaneous, amorphous, inexplicable sensation that overcomes the subject, it gradually becomes familiar to Marcel. In the course of the novel, the narrator attempts various explanations of the nature of the phenomenon. And what is more important, the practice of involuntary memory becomes integral to Marcel's process of writing. Indeed, this is the very premise of the novel; only by learning to master involuntary memory as a technique - i.e. to deliberately invoke, abandon himself to, retain, and depict involuntary memories - is Marcel able to realize his ambition of becoming an author. As in many other respects, Benjamin here follows Proust's lead and devotes a substantial portion of his writing on the topic of memory to ways of conceptualizing Eingedenken as a deliberate practice. In doing this, however, he comes up against a limit to how far he can go along with the Proustian model, and although the differences are rarely articulated openly, we shall begin to see a clear pattern emerging of Benjamin's philosophy of memory differentiating itself from the Proustian model and the concept of Eingedenken taking on aspects that exceed the Proustian horizon. These

126 - if indeed he does realize this ambition; at the end of A la recherche we are left uncertain.
moments of divergence between the two thinkers are central to an understanding of the role attributed to memory in Benjamin’s political philosophy and philosophy of history.

Off hand the notion of seizing the involuntary seems paradoxical. It presents a further variation of Benjamin’s master theme of negotiating ambiguous oppositions, now by placing the opposition between involuntary and voluntary under strain. By being constituted as a practice, Eingedenken does not become accessible at will in the manner of voluntary memory, but it is nevertheless found to involve a certain aspect of volition, and a central aim of the present chapter consists in identifying the nature and scope of this. In blurring the distinction between voluntary and involuntary, Benjamin in effect launches a rethinking of the notion of practice itself. I suggest that the basic trope of an involuntary anamnestic practice can be understood in several ways. It can be understood, firstly, as a practice of self-modification, i.e. as a preparation of the self for the ecstatic experience. In this respect involuntary memory assumes the character of an event that one can occasion but not control. Another possible way of “mastering” involuntary memory consists in deciphering its manner of linking up impressions and events and exercising this logic in an intentional fashion. This too forms a crucial aspect of Benjamin’s philosophy of memory. He identifies Eingedenken as an application of a common human ability that he calls the mimetic ability and thereby shifts the question of how to conceive Eingedenken as a practice to an examination of various memory-related ways of exercising the mimetic ability. A third main dimension of the practice of Eingedenken builds on the premise of an intimate link between memory and material culture. Taking his cue from Proust’s petite madeleine, Benjamin develops an approach to material objects as potential passages to the
unconscious, i.e. as heterogeneous moments in the physical world with a capacity for triggering involuntary memory. This, in turn, is understood to have a liberating effect on the object. Proust too articulates such a notion, but Benjamin expressly develops the point in Marxist terms, thus definitively exceeding the horizon of Proust. His basic contention is that the configuration of the object as a site of memory sets it apart from the general economy of commodification and in so doing destabilizes that economy and prefigures a utopian alternative.

In the following, I shall treat these three approaches to a practice of Eingedenken separately. It will be found that each approach displays a negative as well as a positive aspect. The preparation of the self for involuntary memory is also about removing inhibitors, the attentiveness required also has the character of a distraction, the weaving process characteristic of Eingedenken is also identified as an unraveling, and the configuration of the material object as a genuine memory site is also a dismantling of the many projections and associations that ordinarily bolster individual identity when associated with the possession of things. Taken together, these negative moments account for the subversive aspect of Benjamin’s concept of Eingedenken and prepare a transition to an elaboration and assessment of its political implications.

With regard to the overall thrust of the aspects of Eingedenken grouped together here, it would be convenient if they could collectively be identified as the sobering moment of memory so as to form a symmetrical conceptual counterpart to the ecstatic aspects identified in Chapter 4. This calls for a word of clarification, however. It will be found, firstly, that it is not so easy to keep ecstatic and sober separate in Benjamin’s thinking. The
opposites mutually implicate one another and tend to produce unstable hybrid forms. The characteristics of Eingedenken developed in this chapter therefore need to be thought of as both ecstatic and sobering. But a further point of uncertainty concerns the question of how to understand the notion of "sobering" in the first place. To gain a perspective on this we may take a cue from Benjamin's critique of intoxication as developed at the end of the last chapter. Given the concern that ecstatic practices (be they drug or memory-related) have an in-built tendency to deteriorate into an escapist, compensatory interiority, a defining feature of the corrective moment of Eingedenken has to be an overcoming of this tendency. The notion of "sobering," therefore, may be assumed to carry the connotation of situating the anamnestic event in the public sphere. As we shall see, the aspects of Eingedenken elaborated in the following do generally meet this stipulation, but the exoteric quality of remembrance in Benjamin's conception will nevertheless be found to be even more pronounced in the aspects of Eingedenken developed in Chapter 6 in conjunction with an examination of the tropes of apocalypse and awakening. So the sobering moment proper belongs at that stage and is strictly speaking only being prepared in the present chapter.

127 Wohlfarth links Benjamin's dialectic of ecstasy and sobriety both with Hegel's image (briefly discussed in Chapter 2) of a "Baccantic ecstasy in which no limb is not drunk" (Wohlfarth 1980:137, citing Hegel 1986:46, §47) and with Hölderlin's concept of "holy-sober" ("heilignüchtern"). In relation to the latter, Wohlfarth cites a 1915 piece by Benjamin titled Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin to the effect that "soberness is allowed, called for ... because it is inherently holy" (GS II:125, SW:35). Wohlfarth comments: "It is with the same apparently paradoxical conjunction of seeming opposites that Benjamin will identify the idea of Messianic prose as a feast cleansed of festive songs. Far from being dissolved by 'sober' rationality, the 'holy' coincides with it" (Wohlfarth 1980:137).
Preparing the self: a dialectic of attentiveness and distraction

According to a theological article that is found in different religious traditions, salvation is not something that can be commanded or deserved. It does not come as a result of our intentional, goal-oriented activity but in spite of it. Or at least independently of it, from an overflow of divine grace. Presumably it is the same with the coming of the Messiah. The most we can say about this is that it is not an event that can be predicted; it is not contingent on our actions, not something we can bring about. This poses a problem concerning the possibilities of human agency. Since one cannot make a difference anyhow, why bother? But it is by no means a logical necessity that apathy or fatalism should follow from the exposure to acts of divine intervention beyond one's direct control. There are other ways of composing oneself in face of the divine. Indeed, this may take the form of a disciplined practice, only not a practice of goal-orientation and operational control but rather one of *self-preparation*, of rendering oneself receptive.

Conceivably one could identify countless variations of this basic motif. My concern here is neither to conflate these nor to elaborate on the differences, nor yet to expound any particular religious doctrine. It is merely to suggest that perhaps we should think of the advent of involuntary memory along the same lines. Clearly Eingedenken has a messianic structure in Benjamin's presentation, not only in the redemptive function that it will be attributed (and which will form a separate topic of investigation below) but also in the premise that it cannot be forced. This does not preclude, however, that one can condition oneself for involuntary memory and render oneself receptive. I take this to be a good point of departure for making sense of the manner in which Benjamin construes Eingedenken as
Given the ecstatic thrust of involuntary memory elaborated in Chapter 4, it is natural to assume that the practice of Eingedenken will involve cultivating an aptitude for self-abandonment. This might take the form of subjecting oneself to chemically induced intoxication. As is recorded in the so-called hashish protocols, Benjamin himself experimented fairly extensively with cannabis, albeit always in a studied, reflexive manner. As we have seen, Benjamin does recognize this as a propaedeutic (Vorschule) for profane illumination, i.e. precisely as a practice of self-preparation, but he warns that it is a dangerous one and that the propaedeutic provided by religion is at any rate more rigorous—presumably because it reaches beyond the self (GS II:297; Refl.:179).

There is, of course, something highly peculiar about presenting deliberate intoxication as a preparation for becoming sober. Underlying this is a profound mistrust on

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128 Adorno strikes a similar cord in his Portrait of Walter Benjamin when emphasizing his friend's capacity for "organizing himself so as to be able to relate to his subject-matter in a way that seemed beyond all convention" (Adorno 1983:229, emphasis added). Here the theme of a practice of self-preparation is related, not to memory but more broadly to epistemology: "in citing [truth] he seemed to have transformed himself into a supreme instrument of knowledge on which the latter had left its mark" (ibid.). Wohlfarth too probes the theme of a conditioning of the self in preparation of a cognitive / spiritual illumination and links it expressly with Benjamin's Messianic orientation: "The time for immediate fulfillment has not yet come. It is not by imitating Jesus Christ, Benjamin implies, but by awaiting the Messianic idea that we become the place where spirit realizes itself" (Wohlfarth 1992:163, emphasis added). A powerful indication of the importance of this basic motif to Benjamin's thinking is conveyed by a very early fragment cited by Wohlfarth in the same context: "Almost all forget that they are themselves the place where spirit realizes itself. But because they have stiffened, making themselves the pillars of a building rather than vessels capable of receiving and preserving an ever purer content, they despair of the realization that we feel within ourselves" (Letter to Carla Seligson Sept. 15, 1913, B:93., Corr.:55; cited from Wohlfarth 1992:163, emphasis added to the latter part of the citation).
Benjamin's part of conventional sobriety. But the pattern of paradoxical inversion also works the other way around. In identifying a range of deliberate practices that may serve to occasion the advent of involuntary memory, a certain form of sobriety is also presented as a preparation for the ecstatic. What this two-way inversion signifies, on the whole, is a collapse of the opposition between ecstatic and sober and in a wider sense of any linear logic of preparation. Accordingly, the sobering moment of Benjamin's concept of Eingedenken will be found to retain an element of the ecstatic throughout - and vice versa.  

By far the most important approach to facilitating the advent of Eingedenken, to Benjamin, consist in various ways in cultivating a state of receptiveness, paradoxically through the mediating impact of an element of distraction. What this implies is a preparation of the self, not in the form of concentrating the mind but of relaxing it. Proust depicts this very vividly in the canonical description of the madeleine experience. After having been unexpectedly overcome by an inexplicable sensation of pleasure (attributable to the mémoire involontaire) and then beginning to lose it, Marcel seeks desperately to make it reappear. The dramatic interplay of deliberate effort and relaxation is intriguing:  

I ask my mind to make one further effort, to bring back once more the fleeting sensation. And so that nothing may interrupt it in its course I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea, I stop my ears and inhibit all attention against the sounds from the next room. And then, feeling that my mind is tiring itself without having any success to report, I compel it for a change to enjoy the distraction which I have just denied it, to think of other things, to rest and refresh itself before making a final effort. And then for the second time I clear an empty space in front of it; I

129 Compare Wohlfarth: "'Soberness' is not the aftermath but the medium of intoxication" (Wohlfarth 1980:140).
place in position before my mind's eye the still recent taste of that first mouthful, and I feel something start within me ... (Proust 1981, vol. I:49).

In Benjamin a similar dialectic of attentiveness and distraction is a recurrent theme. In the essay on Leskov (The Storyteller), he expounds an intrinsic affinity between a dissociative state of mind and the pre-modern art of storytelling. He observes that storytelling always involves a retelling of stories previously heard and therefore presupposes the ability to commit such stories to memory. The key point is that this ability is fostered by the work-processes of traditional craftsmanship which are often drawn out and repetitive, and which (in contrast to the repetitiveness of modern factory work) leave the worker in a state of mental relaxation displaying a peculiar mix of distraction and concentration:

For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning going on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is becoming unraveled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship. (GS II:446f.; III.:91)

The distraction effect in these examples is operative at two levels. It is operative, firstly, at the level of perception which, given the repetitive nature of the tasks of craftsmanship and the self-forgetful state of the storyteller's audience, becomes particularly intense. In this manner, things are firmly committed to memory without anyone seemingly paying attention. In the present context, Benjamin expressly associates this structure of perception with work processes that are waning in the modern era, but viewed in the perspective of his
overall analytical concerns, it is interesting that virtually the exact same pattern recurs in his analysis of the modern structure of perception. The fact of events and impressions being committed to memory without immediately entering consciousness is, of course, precisely what characterizes the Freudian *shock effect* expounded in *Chapter 3*, and the constant low-level exposure to shock leads in Benjamin’s analysis to a heightened sensitivity that paradoxically goes hand in hand with an apparent mental dullness. Benjamin sees this epitomized in the figure of the movie-goer (as portrayed in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*), but similar characteristics could also be extended to the somewhat more ambiguous figure of the flaneur, who abandons himself to distraction by actively cultivating an ability to get lost in the city. Overall, the inversion of distraction into attentiveness at the level of perception is strikingly captured by Benjamin in a comment on Baudelaire’s *spleen*, which in a surprising way echoes the concept of *Jetztzeit* articulated in *On the Concept of History*. Despite the immediate connotation of boredom, Benjamin maintains that “in the *spleen* the perception of time is supernaturally keen; every

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130 The flaneur is generally not a progressive, emancipatory figure in Benjamin’s presentation, for although he cultivates an ability to stray, he is figuratively speaking “not going anywhere.” In this his meandering resembles the motif intoxication merely for its own sake, or indeed any ecstatic practice closing in on itself in a one-sided manner. But what is of interest in the present context is precisely the ecstatic moment, i.e. the ability to “lose oneself” in the city, which to Benjamin also contains an emancipatory potential. The degree to which this requires attentiveness and rigorous practice is captured in a striking manner in a passage from *A Berlin Chronicle* where Benjamin claims the ability for himself: “Not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance - nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city - as one loses oneself in a forest - that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passer-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center. Paris taught me this art of straying ...” (GS VI:469; Refl.:8f.).
second finds consciousness ready to intercept its shocks” (GS I:642; Ill.:184).131

The second level at which the dialectic of attentiveness and distraction plays itself out is at the level of remembrance. In effect, the same state of distraction that was operative at the level of perception is again needed to retrieve the memory of those impressions and events. This is the side of the distraction effect explicitly developed by Proust in the passage above, but it is also indicated by Benjamin in the observation that the gift of retelling stories, which is in essence the gift of remembrance, comes to prospective storyteller “all by itself.” In his commentary on Benjamin’s Proust reception, McCole too makes a note of the peculiar mental disposition which typically attends involuntary memory. Stated with allusion to Proust’s habit of ‘turning his days into nights,’ he observes: “Paradoxically, the presence of mind required to snatch the fleeting images of involuntary memory could best be cultivated by simulating the insomniac’s bored, restless distraction” (McCole 1993:267).

The critical observation in this passage is that the aptitude for self-forgetful attentiveness is described as a quality that can be deliberately cultivated. This applies at both levels discussed above. Stated with reference to the level of perception, Benjamin attributes to Kafka a particularly keen attentiveness which he (following Malebranche; cf. Wohlfarth 1989:203) calls the “natural prayer of the soul.” This, I submit, is to be taken in

131 A partial explanation of this surprising inversion, making the spleen look emancipatory, is undoubtedly to be found in Benjamin’s claim, brought up in Chapter 3, that Baudelaire’s spleen constitutes a “genuine historical experience” in a manner that Bergson’s durée does not (GS I:643; Ill.:185). Wohlfarth further substantiates this point in his survey On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin by establishing a close link between the spleen and the inarticulate or not-yet-articulate lament (Klage) that is nature’s response to suffering (Wohlfarth 1989:189).
the sense developed here. Numerous remarks attribute the same basic quality to Proust (as I have argued earlier, Proust depicts a highly developed capacity for ecstatic perception in his description - notably in *Swann's Way* - of the child Marcel's experience of nature and people), and Benjamin himself might well be included in the same company in as much as an exceptional attentiveness to minutiae figures as one of his most remarkable intellectual traits. At the level of remembrance, the same pattern emerges. What we find here is that one can actively invoke involuntary memory by screening out disturbances, preparing oneself mentally for the experience, perhaps even triggering it or allowing it to be triggered, and then abandoning oneself to it. One can, in other words, learn to occasion the event of involuntary memory, facilitate it and watch it unfold. But one can neither control its outcome nor anticipate what it will bring.

This, in summary, may be taken as our first determination of the manner in which Benjamin, following Proust, configures involuntary memory as a practice. In comparison with more extreme forms of ascetic discipline, the deliberate cultivation of a distraction effect at the two levels outlined above may be regarded as a rather limited practice of self-modification. Yet it is of central importance to Benjamin's conceptual scheme in that it highlights the negative moment of involuntary memory, the moment of a forgetting upon which it is premised and which it in turn enlists as a subversive force. Viewed in an overall perspective, this exemplifies the liquidationist side of Benjamin's thinking which we have seen always stands in a relation of tension with the rescuing moment. The capacity for Eingedenken presupposes, firstly, an ability to remove positive hindrances standing in its way. Distraction accomplishes this by responding mimetically to an objective decentring of
the subject. But the negative aspect of Eingedenken also assumes a more active form. It has the further effect of disentangling the self from the webs of purposive action and ideological exploitation of the past with which other concepts of memory are inextricably linked. In the associative logic of involuntary memory, which can be identified at one and the same time as a "weaving" and an "unraveling," Benjamin sees the possibility for a radicalized strategy of immanent critique. This is the theme to which we turn next.

Exercising the mimetic ability: weaving and unraveling

When the theme concerning the nature of the ecstatic flow that characterizes involuntary memory was encountered in the last chapter, a closer examination of it was postponed on account of the maxim that its comprehension already marks a decisive step towards "mastering the involuntary." This is the claim to be substantiated now. In order to pick up the thread where it was left off, it will be helpful one more time to look to the question concerning the object of Eingedenken. In Chapter 4, this was identified as the experience which in the manner of a shock has been deeply registered without ever being processed by consciousness. It is thus a level of experience which it is impossible to constitute as an object of memory in the conventional sense of recall.

While this interpretation stands, it needs to be supplemented by an observation having to do with the inner functioning of involuntary memory and how this reflects on its object. In the opening passages of the Proust essay, Benjamin begins with the assertion that "Proust did not describe a life as it actually was, but a life as it was remembered by the one
who had lived it” (GS II:311; III.:202). But then he immediately corrects himself: “And yet even this statement is imprecise and far too crude. For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection [Eingedenken]” (ibid., my emphasis). In a related passage (investing the act of remembrance with divine connotations of an Aristotelian twist) Benjamin states that “[o]nly the actus purus of recollection itself, not the author or the plot, constitutes the unity of the text” (GS II:312; III.:203).

The upshot of this is that any identification of Eingedenken as an intentional, object-directed form of memory is going to be misleading. Rather, we need to understand Eingedenken as a mental process which at one and the same time tends to close in upon itself and reveals itself to be radically expansive. This seeming contradiction reflects the premise of Eingedenken having an amorphous object that, no matter how precisely it is identified, is always characterized by a surplus. To Benjamin, the mental process of getting at this has to take the form of a weaving. What the trope of weaving implies - in its positive aspect (the negative aspect associated with the notion of an unraveling will be taken up later) - is a continuous linking up of events in an intricate, non-linear fashion.\textsuperscript{132} In this respect Eingedenken differs from both recall and Erinnerung as generally conceived in the post-Hegelian tradition. It differs from recall in being discursive, but is also very different from Erinnerung in as much as the latter is characterized by establishing teleologically organized linear sequences. In Eingedenken, to the contrary, one memory image leads to

\textsuperscript{132} For a discussion of the associative mechanism at work in Proustian involuntary memory, see Deleuze 1972:55ff.
multiple others in a dispersed, infinitely expansive manner. This flow will continue until an interruption occurs or until the ability to remain absorbed gives out. In Benjamin's words, "an experienced event is finite - at any rate confined to one sphere of experience [Erlebnis]; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to all that happened before and after it." A similar observation is made in Benjamin's unpublished autobiographical study A Berlin Chronicle, where the capacity to remember is defined as "the capacity for endless interpolation into the past" ("das Vermögen endloser Interpolationen im Gewesenen," GS VI:476; Refl.:16). Elsewhere in A Berliner Chronicle Benjamin links this with the idea of a continuous unfolding of memory images: "He who has begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth [das Eigentliche] reside; ... remembrance advances from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows even mightier" (GS VI:467f.; Refl.:6).133

Given this conception of memory, a critical challenge consists in understanding our manner of associating experiences, impressions, emotions, sensations, and bits of information in Eingedenken. By what principle are memory images structured, if not by conventional taxonomy, simple chronology, or linear progression? Is there any underlying regularity to the patterns by which the data of involuntary memory are woven together? In connection with a discussion of the etymology of Benjamin's concept of Eingedenken, I

133 On a related note, Benjamin observes in A Berliner Chronicle that: "remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers" (GS VI:487; Refl.:26).
suggested that the qualifying adjective "unwillkürliches" implies that, although seemingly spontaneous, involuntary memory might obey a necessity deeper than that of immediate circumstance and deeper than the connections perceived by our waking consciousness. The question being posed here, in essence, is what necessity might this be? To identify it as the 'law of the night' or the 'logic of the dream' merely shifts the focus: What logic structures dream sequences? This is undoubtedly one of the most difficult but also most important questions pertaining to the nature of involuntary memory. It is a central moment of Benjamin's conceptualization of Eingedenken and marks one of the critical junctures in which his philosophy of memory is integrated with the abiding themes that reach all the way back to the earliest phases of his authorship.

Benjamin's basic answer is that Eingedenken structures its data by a principle of similarity (Ähnlichkeit) or correspondence. Precisely herein lies its fundamental affinity with the dream, for as Benjamin notes, "[t]he similarity of one thing to another which we are used to, which occupies us in a wakeful state, reflects only vaguely the deeper resemblance of the dream world in which everything that happens appears not in identical but in similar guise" (GS II:314; III.:204). Like most other aspects of Eingedenken reviewed so far, this is a theme which Benjamin sees prefigured by Proust. Among the many qualities which he notes with approval in the latter author, one of the foremost is "Proust's frenetic study, his impassioned cult of similarities" ("sein passionierter Kultus der Ähnlichkeit," ibid.). Yet it is a theme for which Baudelaire serves as an equally important source. It is from Baudelaire that Benjamin adopts the plural substantive "the correspondances" to denote the concrete instantiations of the principle of similarity. Very
often Benjamin keeps the reference explicit by leaving the phrase in French, yet occasionally “(die) correspondances” is Germanized to “die Korrespondenzen” and even further to “die Entsprechungen” (see, e.g., GS I:640). In On Some Motifs in Baudelaire, Benjamin relates the notion of correspondences directly to the theme of memory when he observes that they form “the substance of the days of recollection,” and further that “[t]he correspondences are the data of Eingedenken - not historical data, but data of prehistory. What makes festive days great and significant is the encounter with an earlier life” (GS I:639; Ill.:182, my emphasis).

It is important to note that in linking the logic of similarity with the faculty of memory Benjamin invests it with a temporal dimension which is not in and of itself to be taken for granted. As opposed to the symbolists, who directed their attention to simultaneous correspondences, Benjamin insists (or insists in mimetic fashion that Baudelaire insists!) that there is always a temporal depth, “a murmur of the past” to be heard, when two disparate fragments of experience resonate with one another (GS I:640; Ill.:182). It is this echo effect which accounts for the ability of a present sensation to trigger a previous one and which then allows the unfolding of memory images to expand both vertically and horizontally, as it were.

To begin to illuminate what is involved in embracing a logic of similarity, it is helpful to differentiate it from contrasting modes of organizing knowledge. In A Portrait of Walter Benjamin, Adorno says that his friend “was impelled to break the bonds of a logic which covers over the particular with the universal or merely abstracts the universal from the particular” (Adorno 1993:230). By the same token, Benjamin continually placed strain
on the logic of identity and difference, based on the principle of non-contradiction, which underwrites our quest for an unambiguous classification and structuring of data. In comparison, the principle of similarity is less precise and more flexible, but for that very reason also better suited to the on-going grouping and regrouping of data undertaken by involuntary memory. On account of this aptitude for interweaving, the logic of similarity displays a remarkable restorative thrust. From any given starting point it can recreate or resurrect a segment of the world. In the concluding remark of his 1929 essay, Benjamin accredits Proust with just this kind of a cosmogonic power: "For the second time there rose a scaffold like Michelangelo’s on which the artist, his head thrown back, painted the Creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: the sickbed on which Marcel Proust consecrates the countless pages which he covered with his handwriting, holding them up in the air, to the creation of his microcosm" (GS II:324; Ill.:215).

Implicit in this idea of a restorative anamnestic force, it is possible to detect an interesting inversion. What Benjamin is suggesting, in effect, is that the expansive nature of involuntary memory paradoxically leads to a "convolution," "infolding," or "clasping" ("Verschränkung") of time - a linguistic usage which also indicates a spatialization of time (cf. Schlossman 1988:112ff., compare Pensky 1996:166). The continuous linking up of events in unsuspected ways once again pulls together the experiential universe which was otherwise under threat of fragmentation. Whereas a mere diachronical progression has a dispersing effect, the principle of correspondence brings about a unique reintegration of disparate moments of experience. Closely related to this, Benjamin conceives of remembrance as a counterforce to the force of aging and thus attributes to it a power of
rejuvenation. Off hand this sounds mysterious, but an explanation of sorts is provided in connection with the analysis of experience. In a cryptic passage of the Proust study, Benjamin stipulates that what ages us is the opportunities and moments that we have missed - nothing else (GS II:320f.; III.:211f.). Involuntary memory, however, is essentially defined as a form of remembrance that reconnects with moments of experience that were originally "missed" because registered in a state of shock. At a later juncture, we shall see Benjamin extending the same rescuing intervention to past hopes and aspirations that were "missed" due to oppression. At both levels of analysis (phenomenological and political), the anamnestic recovery of "lost time" places the remembering subject in a state of synchronicity with portentous moments in the past. This is in essence a state in which the world is once again young,134 once again oriented towards the messianic future that was wrongly denied, relieved of the heavy burden of a cumulative succession of time coming down to us as irreversible fate.135 Proust's ability to portray the world in such a state marks, in Benjamin's estimation, his exceptional achievement:

To observe the interaction of aging and remembering means to penetrate to the heart of Proust's world, to the universe of convolution. It is the world in a state of resemblance, the domain of the correspondences; the Romanticists were the first to comprehend them and Baudelaire embraced them most fervently, but Proust was the only one who managed to reveal them in our lived life. This is the work of the

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134 In The Politics of Youth: Walter Benjamin's Reading of The Idiot, Wohlfarth inextricably connects Benjamin's idea of youth with the state of alert receptivity characterizing any messianic orientation. He suggests that "the historical materialist is the mature embodiment of "youth" (Wohlfarth 1992: 165)

135 Pensky associates Benjamin's notion of "Verschränkung" with a "[d]eliverance from the temporal continuum" and notes that this "constitutes a neat antithesis to the motion of melancholy contemplation" (Pensky 1996:173).
mémoire involontaire, the rejuvenating force which is a match for the inexorable process of aging. (GS II:320; III:211)

Articulated in general terms, Benjamin describes the ability to detect and posit similarities as the mimetic ability (das mimetische Vermögen). This marks a long-standing theme in his authorship, indeed one which predates any explicitthematization of memory, but by the same token therefore also a theme which connects his late philosophy of memory with a wider set of interests. Stated more precisely, the identification of Eingedenken as a primary instance of mimetic thinking marks one of the junctures at which it becomes fully apparent how closely Benjamin’s ambition to reconceptualize memory is linked with the broader project of rethinking subjectivity. A red thread running through most of his authorship is that the mimetic ability accounts for a pivotal - albeit widely neglected - dimension of our psychological constitution and mental faculties. A few core observations from the twin short pieces called On the Mimetic Faculty and Doctrine of the Similar ("Lehre vom Ähnlichen"), both composed in 1933, will bring this out. The first observation is that the mimetic ability is particularly noticeable in children. 136 To enter into the Proustian universe of convolution, the domain of the correspondences, also, according to Benjamin, means to enter the universe of the child. He bases this on the observation that children at play are not

136 As noted by Buck-Morss, "[n]o modern thinker, with the exception of Jean Piaget, took children as seriously as did Benjamin in developing a theory of cognition." She quotes Gershom Scholem to the same effect: "It is one of Benjamin's most important characteristics that throughout his life he was attracted with almost magical force by the child's world and ways. This world was one of the persistent and recurring themes of his reflections, and indeed, his writings on this subject are among his most perfect pieces" (Susan Buck-Morss 1990, The Dialectics of Seeing, p. 262).
bound by disciplined, rigid principles of classification and causality. They possess a still unspoiled ability to link up what the adult mind no longer takes to be related and form transformations on the basis not of exact principles of identity and difference but of similarity. To the child, the stocking in the laundry hamper is at the same time both a “bag” and a “present” (GS II:314; III:205); “... children’s games are everywhere interlaced with mimetic modes of behaviour, and their range is not limited to what one human being imitates from another. A child not only plays at being a grocer or a teacher, but also at being a windmill or a train” (GS II:205; DoS:65; Refl.:333).

Fundamentally, the correlation of childhood with the ability to posit and detect relations of similarity is an application of a more general intellectual trope with which Benjamin occasionally flirts, namely the trope of the mimetic faculty being archaic in both an ontogenetic and a phylogenetic sense. In terms of the history of the species, Benjamin submits that “[a]s we know, the sphere of life which once seemed to be ruled by the law of similarity used to be much larger. It was the microcosm and the macrocosm” (ibid). This gave rise to a broad spectrum of occult practices and forms of knowledge, including magic, astrology, clairvoyance and graphology. It is not, however, the magical application of the mimetic faculty, i.e. the ability to manipulate the world in covert ways, which primarily interests Benjamin when addressing the logic of similarity. Nor is he intent upon

137 McCole warns that Benjamin’s use of the language of evolutionism should not be taken at face value. He states that “Benjamin was utterly uninterested in evolutionary theories built on ethnological findings. The virtue of his eclecticism was a healthy disrespect for constructing rigid stages of development. He drew on the discourse about ontogeny and phylogeny to confound simpleminded evolutionary thinking and make the historical regressions of ‘advanced’ societies visible” (McCole 1993:219).
romanticizing the archaic. Although the powers of magic have been all but liquidated in the contemporary world, it is Benjamin’s contention that this does not so much signal a decay as rather a transformation of the mimetic ability (GS II:206; DoS:66; Refl.:334). One of his continuing endeavours, then, is to trace its surviving forms. These are surprisingly extensive. Even in a world ruled by rational thought, Benjamin stipulates, “the cases in which people consciously perceive similarities in everyday life [for instance in faces] are a minute segment of those countless cases unconsciously determined by similarity” (GS II:205; DoS:65). What this implies, essentially, is that the logic of similarity is a determining factor in our primary thought processes - the thought processes which Eingedenken too taps into when left to follow its own course. Benjamin goes so far as to suggest that “there may not be a single one of the higher human functions which is not decisively co-determined by the mimetic faculty” (GS II:204; DoS:65).

Benjamin’s most prominent example of a higher faculty decisively co-determined by the mimetic ability, i.e. preserving the mimetic ability in a transmuted form, is the faculty of language.\textsuperscript{138} This is worked out in terms of an onomatopoeic theory of the origin of words, i.e. a theory stipulating that the linguistic sign is not arbitrary but rather in some manner imitates the reality it signifies.\textsuperscript{139} Remembrance, as has already been stated, marks

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\textsuperscript{138} “Language is the highest application of the mimetic faculty: a medium into which the earlier perceptive capacities for recognizing the similar had entered without residue, so that it is now language which represents the medium in which objects meet and enter into relationships with each other” (GS II:209; DoS:68).
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{139} The key to grasping this obscure aspect of language, on Benjamin’s account, lies in a somewhat counter-intuitive notion of “non-sensuous similarities.” These are presented as the kind of similarities which pertain between words meaning the same thing in different languages, or between the spoken and the written word. Presumably it is similarities of this
Benjamin's other primary instance of a higher faculty being co-determined by the mimetic ability. Hitherto, I have registered this link by presenting Eingedenken as one application among many of the mimetic faculty. But the link between Eingedenken and mimesis can be rendered still more intimate - indeed bordering on indistinguishability - by the observation that the mimetic ability for its part necessarily brings the faculty of remembrance into play. Of decisive importance, to Benjamin, is the observation that the recognition of similarity always happens in a flash.\textsuperscript{140} In this it not only resembles Eingedenken (and the generation of genuine historical knowledge, as envisioned in \textit{On the Concept of History}); in so far as recognition always implicitly refers to an earlier moment, it directly involves a moment of remembrance and assumes the character of an act of remembrance as such.

Thus every exercise of the mimetic ability is also an exercise of Eingedenken and will be found to display the exact same duality of spontaneous occurrence and transitive action that transfuses Benjamin's philosophy of memory. This is of decisive importance for our understanding of the manner in which the concept of Eingedenken is configured as practice. Common to all of Benjamin's examples of mimetic behavior is a depiction of mimesis not merely as mimicry, i.e. not merely as the imitation of the objectivity of the object, but rather as an intricate play of identification and distancing in relation to the other. Mimetic practice presfigures a mode of being in the world that is characterized by a

\begin{quote}
order which were originally invested in the naming of things, and even the commonplace use of language that Benjamin calls "profane" reading and writing (GS II:209; DoS:68) retain an element of this mimetic affinity with the signified alongside the semiotic or communicative element of language.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{140} For a closer discussion of this and related points, see Taussig 1993:39f. et passim.
profound affinity with otherness and yet surreptitiously self-assertive; it is a means of self-protection and at the same time a way of laying hold of, indeed possessing things through sensuousness and imitation. To Benjamin it is decisive that mimesis functions as a means of subverting objective, hostile forces confronting the exposed subject. In the essay on “The Elements of Antisemitism” in Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno include a diagnosis of fascism as an “organized control of mimesis” (Adorno & Horkheimer 1969:194; compare Taussig 1993:63ff.). Yet even to this corruption of mimesis, Benjamin responds by mobilizing the pattern of mimetic intervention (coopting the dynamics of destruction and distraction, etc.) that we have found characterizes his strategic interventions at all levels.

Epitomizing these various implications of exercising the mimetic ability, it may be stated as a general premise that the mimetic faculty is poetic in the most emphatic sense of the word. It constitutes a genuinely creative power - as registered already by Aristotle and as reiterated by Benjamin in numerous different contexts, such as when he observes that the correspondances yield Baudelaire his lines of poetry (GS I:640f.; Ill.:183) or that involuntary memory serves the Proustian narrator as a muse (compare Pensky 1996:174). Taken up in the political arena, it is precisely this poetic force that Benjamin is intent on mobilizing for revolutionary purposes. In her ambitious reconstruction of the material for the Passagenwerk, The Dialectics of Seeing, Buck-Morss accentuates this creative-revolutionary aspect of the mimetic ability, particularly as it relates to the sensibilities of the child:

What Benjamin found in the child’s consciousness, badgered out of existence by
bourgeois education and so crucial to redeem (albeit in a new form), was precisely the unsevered connection between perception and action that distinguished revolutionary consciousness in adults. ... an active creative form of mimesis, involving the ability to make correspondences by means of spontaneous fantasy. (Buck-Morss 1990:263)

And further:

Children’s cognition had a revolutionary power because it was tactile, and hence tied to action, and because rather than accepting the given meaning of things, children got to know objects by laying hold of them and using them creatively, releasing from them new possibilities of meaning. (ibid.:264)

Before leaving aside Benjamin’s general doctrine of the similar and returning to the trope of Eingedenken as a weaving, it is relevant to touch upon one further point which will be taken up again in greater detail below, namely the relation that the mimetic ability posits to the world of objects. The decisive factor here is that the very act of positing correspondences - at whatever level - entails a heightened sensitivity to the qualitative distinctions of the objects in question. In keeping with the extreme sensuousness of Benjamin’s thinking, it is an assertion of the particular against the general.141 Proust’s narrator Marcel too displays a sensitivity to qualitative detail in the highest degree, be it in his descriptions of landscapes, gardens, interiors, and cities, in his responses to music and the visual arts, or in his subtle appreciation of tastes and smells. This is an important

141 Kittsteiner makes reference to an entry in the Passagenwerk as evidence that Benjamin saw this as running counter to conventional historical materialism: “He by no means wanted to subscribe to a Marxist understanding of history at the price of its sensory concreteness (V, 575 [N 2,6])” (Kittsteiner 1986:196). In a similar spirit Adorno observes that “his micrological and fragmentary method ... never entirely integrated the idea of universal mediation, which in Hegel as in Marx produces the totality” (Adorno 1983:236).
dimension of his experience of involuntary memory, both in so far as the latter is prompted
by strong sensory triggers and in so far as it unfolds largely at the level of deep-seated
sensual impressions and a minute recounting of the qualities of forgotten things, often
registered in a state of distracted attentiveness. The upshot of this, in short, is that in
involuntary memory - as in magic and in the imagination of the child - the world of objects
comes alive.

We shall return to this point below in connection with an examination of the relation
between memory and material objects in Benjamin’s thinking and of the way in which the
animation of the object mirrors - or prefigures - an animation of the past. At the present
juncture, my concern is only to observe that the idea of objects claiming recognition for
their own unique quality - their “individuality,” as it were - evokes strong associations to
another recurrent theme in Benjamin’s authorship, namely that of “the aura.” The issue of
the aura is most elaborately developed by Benjamin in connection with his reflections on
aesthetics, where the main focus is the decline of aura in art objects, in part as a
consequence of mechanical reproducibility. But the theme is also taken up in connection
with Benjamin’s esoteric philosophy of language, with the figure of the collector and - of
particular interest in the present context - with the theme of involuntary memory.142 In the

142 The notion of the aura is defined variably at different points in Benjamin’s
writing. As has been observed by several commentators, it is not clear that all of these can
be reconciled into a singular conception. Yet McCole puts an interesting spin on this point
in that he detects a “dialectical tension within the concept of aura - between what I call its
liquidationist and its culturally conservative moments” (McCole 1993:17). His broader
thesis, which in fact lies at the heart of his study as a whole, is that the diverse use of the
notion of the aura “can provide a microcosm in which the puzzles and antinomies of
Benjamin’s mature work appear in condensed form” (ibid.:3). In a relatively early but still
highly informative study, Stoessel closely dissects Benjamin’s use of the concept of aura in
1939 Baudelaire study, Benjamin thus describes aura as "the associations which, at home in
the mémoire involontaire, tend to cluster around the object of perception" (GS I:644;
Ill.:186). Similarly he suggests that "the distinctive feature of the images that arise from the
mémoire involontaire is seen in their aura" (GS I:646; Ill.:187). A little later on in the same
section, this nexus of aura and involuntary memory is related directly to the theme of an
animation of the object world:

Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in
human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and
man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn.
To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to
look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the mémoire
involontaire. (GS I:646f.; Ill.:188)\(^{143}\)

The crucial point here is that the correspondences, which were earlier identified as the data
of Eingedenken, are to be taken as auratic objects. In light of this, one might suggest that
the unique, deeply personal relationship with the past that Benjamin associates with
Eingedenken has to do with the ability of the moments of the past which we contemplate in
involuntary memory "to look at us in return." This may be interpreted as an expression of
the asymmetrical reciprocity between past and present which forms the underlying premise
of Benjamin’s entire approach to memory and history.

\(^{143}\) Interestingly, the same motif is brought out in the poem in Baudelaire’s Les
fleurs du mal which is expressly entitled Correspondances: “Man wends his way through
forests of symbols / Which look at him with their familiar glances” (“L’Homme y passe a
travers des forets de symboles / Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers," GS I:648;
Ill.:189).
If, at this juncture, we are to pick up the general line of argument being developed in this chapter, the central point to note is that the association of Eingedenken with other applications of the mimetic ability indicates a variety of ways in which Eingedenken itself can be seized as a practice. Despite its apparent spontaneous and involuntary character, Eingedenken is now seen as the exercise of a common human faculty, and this is readily intelligible as something that can be deliberately undertaken (as is the case with children exercising the mimetic ability) and as a capability that can be cultivated and refined (as is the case with magicians and poets, etc.). Precisely the cultivation and sustained exercise of the mimetic ability is, on Benjamin’s reading, the strength of Proust’s authorship and accounts for the way in which the discovery of involuntary memory (ostensibly) allows Marcel to realize his ambition of becoming an author. The most simple explanation of this is that memory furnishes the substance of the novel. This, of course, is part of the explanation, but it is also partly misleading in that it presents remembering and writing as two successive phases of the creative process. In Benjamin’s interpretation of Proust there is no sharp separation between remembering and writing. To the monomaniac author, the process of writing itself becomes a “frenetic pursuit of correspondences.” His prose is thus structured by the logic of similarity and captures the very same flow that is operative in Eingedenken. Writing, in other words, assumes the quality of an ecstasy of representation based on an endless interpolation into the past exactly in the manner of involuntary memory. It is a perennially unfinished thought process which, like remembrance, is best
picted as a weaving. Benjamin notes that this is actually preserved in the etymology of
the word “text”:

As the Romans called a text for a web [das Gewebte], so no one’s text is more
tightly woven than Marcel Proust’s. For him nothing was tight or durable enough. ... 
Thus the laws of remembrance were operative even within the confines of the work. 
(GS II:311f.; Ill.:202)

The critical point here is that writing itself is directly to be understood as a practice of
Eingedenken. It thus marks a clear example of the motif of seizing of the involuntary, and
indeed one which it is possible to picture being emulated by others. Viewed in a broader
perspective, the Proustian écriture may also be seen to present a model for how to re-
integrate Erlebnis and Erfahrung given the disruption of experience that characterizes the
phenomenology of modernity. But this being said, it is not the practice of Eingedenken
advocated by Benjamin himself, nor the answer to his call for a rethinking of experience.
Proust, as we have seen, embraces involuntary memory as a creative resource in the sense
of a cosmogonic force. He exploits what I have earlier called ‘the restorative thrust’ of the
mimetic ability to revive the world of his childhood and youth and thereby to relive the
“great dramas” that fate had in store for him but which he missed due to inattentiveness the
first time around. In Benjamin’s analysis, this is an ambiguous undertaking. His admiration
for Proust notwithstanding, he does not trust the impulse to resuscitate the past. While
recognizing A la recherche as a great literary accomplishment, he also sees it as
symptomatic of a “growing discrepancy between literature and life” (GS II:311; Ill.:202). In
a situation of widespread inability to integrate life experiences in coherent narrative
sequences, literature stands in danger of taking on a life of its own at the expense of actual
existence. This tendency, which was encountered at the end of the last chapter as a pattern of anamnestic escapist, is taken to an extreme by Proust - both in the manner in which the author locked himself up in a cork lined room to abandon himself to his memories and in the manner in which his life is fulfilled by being reconstructed in writing. His "blind, senseless, frenzied quest for happiness," Benjamin therefore argues, is ultimately a quest for "the eternal repetition, the eternal restoration of the original, first happiness. It is the elegiac idea of happiness - it could also be called Eleatic - which for Proust transforms existence into a preserve of memory. To it he sacrificed in his life friends and companionship ..." (GS II:313; III:203f.).

Like the pursuit of intermittent ecstatic experiences, Proustian writing stands in danger of becoming merely a substitute compensating for the dissatisfaction in real life. Far from being activating in a political sense, as is the underlying purpose of Benjamin's concept of Eingedenken, this has a pacifying effect. In order to meet his own standards for intervening in the politics of the past, Benjamin therefore has to develop a strategy for mobilizing the mimetic ability that is different from the Proustian écriture. He needs, in other words, to further develop the concept of Eingedenken as practice. A crucial step towards this consists in juxtaposing the restorative moment of Eingedenken with the negative, destructive aspect of involuntary memory that we saw beginning to emerge in the previous section. This, too, is associated with the trope of Eingedenken as a weaving; only, it is now the inverse of weaving itself, namely unraveling, that is brought into play. By invoking the idea of a "Penelope work of remembrance" (die Penelopearbeit des Eingedenkens; GS II:311; III:202), Benjamin indicates that both moments are part of one
and the same process. Penelope, of course, undid during the night what she had woven during the day, and Eingedenken by analogy, being a work of the night, is found to effectively unravel the memory associations of waking consciousness. It not only spins new webs of recollection but also, in the very same process, unravels the webs spun by purposive remembrance. In this respect, involuntary memory must simultaneously be conceived as a forgetting. When introducing the trope of weaving by presenting Eingedenken as a Penelope work of recollection, Benjamin therefore immediately suggests a corrective: "Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting? Is not the involuntary recollection [Eingedenken], Proust's mémoire involontaire, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory" (ibid.).

The interchangeability suggested here between remembrance and forgetting presents a classical example of the instability of key oppositions in Benjamin's writing. But it also alerts us to a two-way antithetical relationship between the forms of memory examined in Chapter 4, namely voluntary and involuntary memory. Both forms of memory involve a negative aspect, i.e. an element of forgetting, as well as a positive aspect, and each form of memory has a destructive impact on the other. Thus, on the one hand, it is a familiar experience that the day unravels the night's work. Involuntary memories (like dreams) tend to be forgotten virtually the moment that a conscious effort at recollection sets in. Hence the need to relax the mind, cultivate a state of distraction, and avoid any deliberate effort in order to facilitate the occurrence of Eingedenken. And hence also Proust's need to isolate himself and "turn his days into nights" (ibid.). But, as Benjamin now points out, the converse is also true. Like Penelope, the night also unravels what the day has woven, and it
is this latter aspect that Benjamin more fervently than Proust undertakes to exploit. In depicting the familiar as strange, the practice of Eingedenken takes on a certain Surrealist quality which in comparison with the Marxist strategy of ideology critique indicates a radicalized form of immanent critique. For by the same token that Eingedenken involves a loosening of the subject, so does the pursuit of correspondences in Benjamin’s conception effectively mark a disentanglement and undermining of the narrative constructions by which the latter is bolstered.

To appreciate the full significance of the negative, decontextualizing side of Eingedenken being developed here, we need to remind ourselves of how deeply entrenched a function of memory it is to posit relations of continuity that bolster constructions of social identity. From a certain point of view this may be identified as the rationale behind the Hegelian concept of Erinnerung, and it is similarly the most common dynamic when memory is mobilized in contemporary political contexts. We posit relations of narrative continuity when we seek to understand how as individuals we have been shaped by certain critical events in the past, and similarly when at a national level certain key historical events are presented as foundational for a given cause or political constitution. The same pattern is even more pronounced when history is construed in a historicist fashion as an unbroken chain of events, at whatever level, which logically and necessarily leads up to a given state of affairs in the present. Because such links with the past legitimize the present, it is taken to be our social duty to remember. Whether attending formal commemorative ceremonies or simply immersing ourselves in the sphere of communalized politics, we repeatedly swear allegiance to particularistic causes by dutifully reciting the inscription on Québec licence
plates: je me souviens.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the particularism inherent in such appeals to collective remembrance mark a deterioration of ideology itself and, in turn, posit the need for radicalized strategies of immanent critique in comparison with the classical Hegelian Marxist ideology critique. There is no shortage of indications in Benjamin’s late work of how profoundly he distrusted the reconstructions of history by which the present legitimizes itself - what in thesis 7 of On the Concept of History is identified as the historiography of “the victors” (GS I:696f., Ill.:255f.). We have already encountered this distrust in connection with a review of his materialist historiography and again in connection with his commitment to “embracing poverty” in response to the phenomenology of modernity. But the additional point that emerges in the present context is that by associating involuntary memory with a moment of forgetting, Benjamin builds a firm opposition to the ideological thrust of historicist memory directly into his notion of Eingedenken. Not only does it avoid lending itself to narratives of self-legitimation; the latter are precisely what is subject to being forgotten when involuntary memory begins to weave its webs. By the same token, the negative moment of Eingedenken explodes any illusions of self-contained interiority and firmly situates the anamnestic event in the public sphere. This trait becomes all the more pronounced when we pursue the intimate link, announced earlier in this section, between memory and material culture.
Memory and material culture

Up until this point, the primary focus in our elaboration of Benjamin’s concept of Eingedenken has been on what might be called the introspective side of memory. This reaches its epitome in the image of a self-contained flow of memory turning entirely upon itself - thus manifesting a genuine “night of self-consciousness” in the sense defined by Hegel as the last moment of dialectical transition before the emergence of “a new world and a new shape of Spirit” (Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel 1986:590, §808). To reduce Proust’s great “search for things past” to such a formula would, of course, be a gross simplification, yet it confronts Benjamin with the tendency towards anamnestic self-absorption which he, like Hegel, is committed to interrupting. The propensity to self-sufficiency is curbed, to a certain extent, by Benjamin’s insistence that the weaving of Eingedenken is also in effect an unraveling. But a further important challenge to the reduction of remembrance to an introspective flow occurs through Benjamin’s close association of Eingedenken with various forms of material culture. Aside from the works of literary criticism which have been our main focus thus far, this is in fact the primary context in which Benjamin addresses the topic of memory.144

The overall theme of memory and material culture is manifest in Benjamin’s city

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144 One of the most fertile explorations of the link between memory and material culture in Benjamin is found in Pensky’s Tactics of Remembrance, which in the twin Proust and Surrealism essays of 1929 detects “critical models for the way that subjective memory, directed onto a collection of cultural artifacts, might serve to disrupt a hegemonic historical continuity, thereby rescuing images from the past (das Gewesene) of an individual life or of an entire historical epoch” (Pensky 1996:169f.).
studies\textsuperscript{145} - notably the great unfinished project on the Paris Arcades - as well as in his abiding preoccupation with the bourgeois culture of consumption and associated topics such as the figure of the collector, fashion, the commodity fetish, the outmoded, and the ruins of progress. What these themes have in common is a pattern whereby the orientation towards material objects marks an \textit{extroversion} of the remembering subject which in turn facilitates a potential political impact of memory. Generally speaking, this may be designated the materialist dimension of Benjamin's concept of Eingedenken. Leaving aside the question of whether Benjamin's materialism can ultimately be reconciled with a Marxist political agenda, the notion is invoked here in the more rudimentary sense that his philosophy of memory is inherently a philosophy of things and that his thinking is characterized by an exceptional degree of sensuousness. Yet it may be anticipated in advance that this involves much the same idiosyncrasy and conceptual irreverence as the concept of historical materialism developed in the 1940 historiographical theses, where theology was surreptitiously brought onto the stage. It is thus striking that Benjamin's anamnestic approach to material objects displays a pronounced idealist character - virtually an element of animism - while at the same time broaching genuine Marxist themes. The tension between these two poles needs to be fully exposed if we are to grasp the complex strategic positioning that informs Benjamin's conceptualization of Eingedenken as practice.

\textsuperscript{145} Gilloch has subjected these studies, spanning a period from the mid-1920s to the end of Benjamin's life, to a systematic, comparative analysis placing a central emphasis on the topic of memory; see especially Gilloch 1996:55-92.
Of triggers and memory sites

In turning to an examination of the material aspect of Benjamin’s philosophy of memory, it is natural to begin with the observation that every example of Eingedenken discussed so far is prompted by a tangible or sensuous trigger. To be sure, one must assume that in many, if not most, instances of involuntary memory the operative trigger is not readily discernible. It is even possible that under certain circumstances the triggering factor is altogether lacking, in which case the emergence of memory images must be regarded as entirely spontaneous. But the critical point in our present context is that Benjamin repeatedly accentuates the assumption of a more or less determinate (albeit often deeply personal) link between a present object or sensual impression on the one hand and an expansive set of memory images on the other. This is a link which Proust too establishes as integral to his notion of mémoire involontaire. Thus, it was a very specific gustatory and olfactory similarity between the madeleine now and similar snacks served to him years ago by his aunt Leonie which transported the narrator to the Combray of his youth. In the passage of A la recherche which Benjamin took to be Proust’s classical formulation of involuntary memory (GS V:508), the narrator invokes the “Celtic belief” that souls are held captive in material objects and rephrases this in terms of the idea that “[t]he past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that object will give us) of which we have no inkling” (Proust 1981, vol. I:47-8; compare Ill.:158). At the very end of the Overture, Proust again returns to the theme of embodied memory and the affinity it reveals with the sensations of taste and smell:

But when from a long-distance past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after
the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (Proust 1981, vol. I:50f.)

The link between memory and material object is significant in several respects. Firstly, it reinforces the premise that memory is not just an ideational event. The faculties of sense and smell with which Proust associates involuntary memory are commonly understood to be furthest removed from the intellect, the critical point being that this renders them less vulnerable to the manipulation and distortion that invariably occurs in conscious memory. Indeed, Proust’s image of a “tiny, impalpable drop of essence” may be taken as an almost tangible expression of the notion that Benjamin develops on several occasions\(^{146}\) of oblivion as a preserving factor. Secondly, the association of remembrance and particular objects reinforces the central premise of Benjamin’s philosophy of history that the past is not universally accessible. Proust conveys this point by depicting it as a matter of pure chance whether we ever come across the object capable of triggering involuntary memory and thus putting us in touch with our own most intimate past. In his commentary on Proust, Benjamin accepts this, or at least acknowledges the evocative force of such a direct juxtaposition of chance and self-fulfilment, but when viewed in a wider perspective it is found that his extensive elaboration of the memory implications of various forms material culture - i.e. different ways of handling and “reading” objects - transcends the purely passive connotations of the motif of chance and contributes to the conceptualization of

\(^{146}\) E.g. in the Kafka study (GS II:430; III.:131), cf. Chapter 3 above.
Eingedenken as practice.

This leads us to a third central observation. A striking implication of viewing objects as possible triggers of involuntary memory is that this constitutes the physical and social spaces we inhabit as heterogeneous. As things and sensations are attributed the capacity to suddenly transport us to a different level of consciousness, our physical environment takes on the character of a minefield waiting to explode. This motif of a semantic a landscape punctuated by moments of difference must, in my interpretation, be seen as the exact counterpart to the theory of temporal heterogeneity presented in On the Concept of History. Here the concept of the present as a "time of the now' [Jetztzeit] which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (GS I:704; Ill.:263, thesis A), i.e. of "every second of time [being] the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter" (GS I:704; Ill.:264, thesis B), is articulated in stark opposition to historicist notions of empty, homogeneous time. Similarly, in spatial terms, Eingedenken re-enchants the world by responding to scattered elements of a qualitatively different nature from the general order of material interchangeability.

Such moments of spatial heterogeneity may be called sites of memory, and a general premise of Benjamin's philosophy of memory, accordingly, is that Eingedenken intervenes at memory sites. A critical challenge consists in grasping the manner of this intervention. The French historian Pierre Nora, from whom I have adopted the phrase, contrasts the idea of sites of memory (lieux de mémoire) with what he calls genuine environments of memory (milieux de mémoire). He interprets the salience and contemporary significance of the former as a function of an irreversible decline of the latter. "There are lieux de mémoire,
sites of memory," he proposes, "because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" (Nora 1989:7). According to Nora, this shift marks "the end of a tradition of memory. The moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a *reconstituted object* beneath the gaze of critical history" (ibid.:11f., my emphasis). Thus, to Nora, the memory which attaches itself to memory sites is in reality a surrogate memory (a memory "au lieu de") which is indicative of social fragmentation and loss: "We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left" (ibid.:7).

From a formal point of view this interpretation is consistent with Benjamin's notion of Eingedenken as a memory of modernity and a counter-memory to a pervasive dynamic of social forgetting. But contrary to Nora, Benjamin does not lament the loss of an integrated environment of memory and makes no attempt to revive such environments, not even in the fragmentary form allowed by the reconstitution of celebrated memory sites such as national monuments and the treasures of the cultural heritage. Instead, as we have seen, he treats memory sites as *points of access* to a marginalised, forgotten, indeed repressed history. In Benjamin's opus this conception of memory sites leads to a general designation of moments of spatial heterogeneity as *passages* to the underworld. Nowhere is this motif rendered more forcefully than in the earliest exposé of the master project of the last decade and a half of Benjamin's life, the *Arcades Project*. In German, arcades are *Passagen*, which is to say just this, sites in the physical landscape and at the same time triggers of Eingedenken, paths leading into our past existence and the past existence of the environment we inhabit. In interlacing the two dimensions, Eingedenken exceeds the
boundaries of individuation. In the city-scape, arcades are similarly ambiguous, both inside and outside - interiority revealed as exteriority and vice versa. It is on account of this double connotation of the notion of a passage that Benjamin selected the Paris arcades as emblematic of his intellectual aspirations during his final years. The relevant fragment summarizing this vision has already been alluded to in connection with the motif of Eingedenken as a submersion but now deserves to be cited in full:

In ancient Greece one pointed out places that led down into the underworld. Our waking existence, too, is a land in which hidden places lead into the underworld, full of inconspicuous sites where dreams flow out. In the daytime we pass them by unsuspectingly, but once sleep comes we swiftly grasp our way back to them and lose ourselves in the dark passageways. The city’s labyrinth of houses, by the light of day, is like consciousness; the arcades (those galleries that lead into its past existence) flow out unnoticed into the streets. But at night, beneath the dark masses of houses, their more compact darkness leaps out frighteningly; and the late passer-by hastens past them, unless we have encouraged him to take the journey down the narrow alley. (GS V:1046, quoted from McCole 1993:243)

A good way to summarize the difference between Nora’s and Benjamin’s conception of memory sites is that whereas the former function as symbols of national identity, Benjamin’s memory sites possess an allegorical structure that makes them capable of unhinging such identity constructions. They are constituted not by the mirroring of a positive self-image in defining experiences and monuments of collective aspirations but

147 Habermas glosses this basic opposition in the following manner: “Allegory, which expresses the experience of the passionate, the oppressed, the unreconciled, and the failed (that is, the negative), runs counter to a symbolic art that prefigures and aims for positive happiness, freedom, reconciliation, and fulfillment” (Habermas 1983:134). This opposition is fundamental to Benjamin’s thinking at all levels. It also informs his on-going dispute with Adorno, in that the latter as, in his own view, a ‘loyal’ critic seeking to hold Benjamin accountable to his own standards repeatedly criticized the Passagenwerk for being too affirmative (“positivistic”), i.e. not sufficiently allegorical.
rather by the lingering impact - deferred effect - of the shock of historical wrongs.

Articulated in the language of psychoanalytical theory, which Benjamin himself sporadically invokes to clarify the concept of Eingedenken, it may be suggested that Benjamin’s passages are sites of a cathexis of unreconciled energies. It is this, ultimately, which lends them their explosive and potentially subversive character. Due to this abiding negative dimension of the memory object, the normalcy instituted by secondary forgetting (i.e. the chronic forgetting of social forgetting) and affirmative memory alike remains fundamentally unstable. Another way of articulating the same insight is in terms of the “extraordinary discovery” that Benjamin attributed to the Surrealists concerning the tremendous revolutionary energies stored up in the outmoded object (GS II:299; Refl.:181). These are the energies that Benjamin seeks to liberate by pursuing the link between memory and material culture. ¹⁴₈

In the next section this link will be further examined in light of Benjamin’s portrayal of the figure of the collector. While Benjamin identified himself quite closely with this figure, it will nevertheless be found to come up against certain irreducible limitations, and the section therefore gradually shifts to an elaboration of these limitations and a sketch of the ways in which other key figures in Benjamin’s gallery of physiognomists (i.e. interpreters of material objects) correct them.

¹⁴₈ Compare Benjamin’s comment on the project of the Passagenwerk, as articulated in a conversation with Ernst Bloch and recorded in Konvolut N: “It was in the context of a conversation in which I set forth how this project - as in the splitting of the atom - releases the enormous energy of history that lies bonded in the ‘Once upon a time’ of classical historical narrative” (GS V:578, N 3,4).
**Redeeming objects**

In the above discussion of the idea of the memory site, the motif that was most strongly accentuated was the ability of certain material objects to facilitate access to and thereby 'redeem' a neglected past in the sense of rescuing it from the forces of forgetting. But this is only one side of the picture. In the Proust excerpt that was taken as our point of departure in the last section, one finds that the release of memory triggers is also in a certain sense understood to redeem the material objects themselves (which, like souls, are "waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest"). This evocative language points to a theological moment inherent in the concept of the mémoire involontaire which Benjamin picks up on and in various ways expands. It is premised on an anthropomorphization of the material object which by dialectical reversal reflects back on the remembering subject. Our primary aim in the present section will be to investigate Benjamin's notion of an anamnestic redemption of objects and thus prepare the way for a more general discussion of the theme of redemption in the final chapter.

The basic idea in the following is, in other words, to reverse the perspective of the remembering subject and inquire from the point of view of the object what it implies for it to be configured as a site of memory? This question is closely connected with the theme of spatial heterogeneity in so far as the latter attributes uniqueness - individuality, as it were - to certain objects which stand out and rupture the ubiquitous "sameness" in the mass of homogeneous, indifferent, interchangeable things. A similar reversal of perspective was encountered earlier in the idea of the auratic object - the object capable of returning our gaze - that came up in connection with our examination of the logic of similarity and
Benjamin's notion of the correspondences as the data of Eingedenken. One should note the
dramatic thrust of this motif; it serves to reanimate a disenchanted world and thus points to
a theme concerning the dialectic of enchantment and disenchantment, which too is integral
to Benjamin's conception of Eingedenken as practice.

How the penetrating gaze of involuntary memory reflects on the material object is
best illustrated in Benjamin's depiction of the figure of the collector, although it will be
found that this persona has its counterparts in other figures inhabiting Benjamin's writings
(e.g. the flaneur and the rag picker) as well as in various aesthetic and literary motifs (e.g.
allegory and montage). As is well known, Benjamin himself was an avid collector,
especially a bibliophile, but also a collector of toys and other objects. He gave radio talks to
children on the topic of stamp collection, and in her personal memory of Benjamin Hannah
Arendt emphasizes his passion for collecting quotations in small black notebooks (Ill.:45).
Interestingly, the methodological procedure of collecting and juxtaposing textual fragments
is already defined as a theoretical premise of the Trauerspiel study, and one might suggest
that the entire Arcades Project was a vast exercise in collecting and exhibiting memorabilia
of 19th century Paris. In doing this, Benjamin reveals an exceptionally keen eye for the
hidden agendas and also the regressive moments in the material culture of the bourgeoisie
(and eventually also of the pacified proletariat). Thus, in cultivating the habit of collection
as a personal passion it may be suggested that Benjamin trained himself to mimetically
elicit the secrets of bourgeois culture - much as Proust trained himself to move

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149 In Konvolut H Benjamin remarks about his work as a whole that "here the Paris
arcades are considered as if they were possessions in the hand of a collector" ("Besitztümer
in der Hand eines Sammlers," GS V:272; H 1a,5).
inconspicuously in the circles of Paris' declining aristocracy.

The defining characteristic of Benjamin's collector\textsuperscript{150} is that he cultivates "a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value - that is, their usefulness - but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate" (GS IV:389; Ill.:60; compare GS V:271, H 1a,2). Objects come into their own in the context of the collection; being virtually anthropomorphized, they are bestowed with the dignity of having an individual history and take on a life of their own, dense with layers of embodied memory to which the collector is attuned. With this premise in mind, Benjamin asserts that "not only books but also copies of books have their fates" (GS IV:389; Ill.:61), and he goes on to suggest that "the most important fate of a copy is its encounter with him [the collector], with his own collection" (ibid.). Thus, when approached from the point of view of the object, it is Benjamin's contention that the event of being acquired by a genuine collector marks a rebirth and a liberation. He states that "one of the finest memories of a collector is the moment when he rescued a book ... To a book collector, you see, the true freedom of all books is somewhere on his shelves" (GS IV:393; Ill.:64, my emphasis).

How to understand Benjamin's notion of purchase as a liberation? In addressing this question, we must first note that there is something highly peculiar about an avowed Marxist advocating private possession is such unequivocal terms. Benjamin is well aware of this and acknowledges that public collections are "more useful academically" and "less

\textsuperscript{150} - as portrayed in numerous essays, including \textit{Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian} and \textit{Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century}, but most notably in Konvolut H of the \textit{Passagenwerk} and in the small piece from 1931, originally prepared for radio, titled \textit{Unpacking my Library}. 
objectionable socially" (GS IV:395; Ill.:67). But he nevertheless insists that "objects only get their due" in private collections because in contrast to public collections the former facilitate an intimate relation with reciprocal implications for object and owner: "for a collector - and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be - ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them" (GS IV:396; Ill.:67, emphasis added; cf. GS V:273; H 2,3).

The key, then, to the idea of private ownership as a rescue is that by personalizing the relationship the collector frees the object from what Benjamin in a related connection describes as "the drudgery of being useful" (GS V:53; Refl.:155). An underlying corollary of this premise is that the practice of the collector opposes and resists the otherwise all-pervasive commodification of the object, which is in essence a scheme of comprehensive utility. Despite Benjamin's unorthodox accent on private ownership, this is a genuine Marxian theme. In the opening pages of Das Kapital, Marx observes that wealth in capitalist societies takes the form of an immense mass of commodities and this, he submits, confronts us with a need to critically examine the form of the commodity itself. In precisely this spirit Benjamin refuses to take the form of the commodity for granted, but in place of

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151 See also GS V:277; H 3a,1.

152 The fact that the commodity in the classical Marxian analysis is associated with "exchange value" as opposed to "use value" is therefore partly misleading. In fact, what commodification subsumes is the unique quality of the object taken in its own right. Since it is this we relate to as consumers when removing the commodity from the circulation sphere, the qualitative determinations of the object reappear in the notion of use value. But they are not for this reason reducible to simple utility, and it is precisely this qualitative residue, one might surmise, that Benjamin's English translators seek to accentuate by translating "Gebrauchswert" as "intrinsic value" (compare, e.g., GS V:53 and Refl.:155) - a practice that will also be employed in the following.
the analysis of the abstract form of value which sets Marx' critique of political economy in motion he seeks to directly articulate an approach to material objects that transcends their impoverished status. What in Marxian terms distinguishes the commodity from a material object pure and simple is the fact that it has been rendered exchangeable in a scheme of universal commensurability. As such, it is stripped of its uniqueness - qualities are reduced to a formula of quantity, and the object becomes inherently replaceable and dispensable.

Benjamin conveys the same basic idea by depicting the capitalistic commodity economy as a context of ever-sameness (the flip side of the pretense of fashion to present consumers with the ever-new), but private possession, in certain exceptional cases, reverses this dynamic on account of the intimate relation that the collector forges with the object. The very act of purchase, when undertaken by a genuine collector, removes the object from the order of universal exchange without, however, relegating it to the sphere of consumption where it would be evaluated merely in terms of its utility. Rather, the collector installs the object in a privileged private sphere, i.e. the collection, where he is able to relate to what Benjamin calls "the intrinsic value" of the object (GS V:53; Refl.:155).

The broader significance of the collector's intervention against commodification, as I read Benjamin, is that the dignity thus bestowed on the object has a reciprocal effect on the collector and that it thereby prefigures a context of social relations in which human dignity is restored.153 Articulated in Marxist terminology, the premise underlying

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153 Compare Pensky: "the collected thing ... can now reveal the dialectical structure contained within it: it is lovable both for its own sake and as a window through which the future, as a promise of bodily happiness, can be glimpsed through a moment of the discarded material past" (Pensky 1996:186). In Konvolt H 3a,3, Benjamin invokes a passage in Marx to a related effect: "Ich can mich praktisch nur menschlich zu der Sache
Benjamin's intervention in the realm of material culture is that the critique of the commodification of material objects at the same time functions as a critique of the reification of social relations. This, as is well known, was one of the dominant themes which drew Benjamin to Marxism in the early 1920s in connection with his reading of Lukacs' History and Class Consciousness. The practice of the collector both mirrors and inverts the thrust of reification, for both model human relations on object relations, i.e. on a particular form of material culture, but whereas capitalism models human relations on the reduction of the material object to commodity (thus reducing the human being to laborer esteemed merely as a source of abstract exchange value), the practice of the collector reverses this thrust by anthropomorphizing and bestowing dignity upon the object. By conferring "intrinsic value" upon the object, Benjamin's collector in effect forges a relation that exceeds the alternative presented by Marx between exchange value and use value, but this is fully is consistent with the Marxian resolve not to be restricted to the capitalist definition of wealth and may be seen as a step towards a utopian concept of wealth. A utopian concept of wealth, in turn, prefigures a utopian concept of non-reified, non-exploitative social relations and a reconciliation of humanity with nature.\textsuperscript{154}

\textsuperscript{154} One can read a similar point into thesis 11 of On the Concept of History, where the notion of wealth is addressed and Benjamin objects to the social democratic // vulgar-Marxist doctrine that human labour is the source of all wealth. This, Benjamin stipulates, merely reproduces "the old Protestant ethics of work" and cements the relations of exploitation that define all capitalist production. The point, as Benjamin proposes with reference to the utopian socialists, is rather to fundamentally rethink the constellation of
At this juncture, there are two central observations that need to be brought into the discussion. One is that memory has an important stake in the practice of the collector. This, indeed, is our central theme, but before turning to it, it is necessary to note that the figure of the collector is not unambiguously “progressive” in Benjamin’s analysis. Aside from appearing as an idealized figure in Benjamin’s cast of *dramatis personae*, the collector is also a concrete historical figure at home in the high bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century, and in this incarnation he (or she) does not realize the potential sketched above. Benjamin therefore repeatedly draws a distinction between “the real collector, the collector as he ought to be” and what we for lack of a better phrase may call “bourgeois” collectors.

In *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, Benjamin’s 1935 exposé of the projected Passagenwerk, the latter figure is described as “[t]he private person [for whom] living space becomes, for the first time, antithetical to the place of work” (GS V:52; Refl.:154). This is the liberated bourgeois subject who cultivates individualism and for whom “the house appears as the expression of personality” (ibid.) but also the uprooted subject who “demands that the interior be maintained in his illusions” (ibid.). Benjamin accentuates the inability of this incarnation of the collector to realize his critical potential by describing his work as a “Sisyphean task of obliterating the commodity-like character of things through his ownership of them” (GS V:53; Refl.:155, my emphasis). He falls short of the concept of

labour and wealth: “Compared with this positivistic conception, Fourier’s fantasies, which have so often been ridiculed, prove to be surprisingly sound. According to Fourier, as a result of efficient cooperative labour, four moons would illuminate the earthly night, the ice would recede from the poles, sea water would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man’s bidding. All this illustrates a kind of labour which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials” (GS I:699; III:259).
the true collector in that "he merely confers connoisseur value on [things, his possessions], instead of intrinsic value" (ibid.).

Having registered a regressive moment in the figure of the collector, it must be acknowledged that while Benjamin's intent in drawing a sharp distinction between genuine and inauthentic collectors is clear (namely to set his own critical intervention apart from the elements of bourgeois culture that he surreptitiously appropriates), the content of the distinction is not. The two versions of the figure of the collector are seemingly characterized by a similar manner of relating to the object, at least to the extent that the bourgeois collector also constitutes the object of his possession as unique and also maintains an intimate relationship with it. A central challenge, then, in conceptualizing Benjamin's critical intervention at the level of material culture consists in specifying more precisely what it is that distinguishes the genuine collector from the other. This question takes on a further dimension when it is noted that the capitalistic economy as such is by no means unfamiliar with the idea of animated objects. Indeed, it is a central tenet of the classical Marxist analysis that capitalism *fetishizes* the commodity, and from a certain point of view it would appear that the collector merely carries this thrust to an extreme. Fetishization, however, does not lead to a genuine redemption and restoration of the object. Viewed in this light, the question of what actually distinguishes the true collector therefore necessarily involves a question of how s/he relates to the commodity fetish. This is a central focus of Benjamin's analysis. The commodity fetish is identified in the 1935 exposé as one of the salient phantasmagoria of bourgeois culture (witness the libidinal fascination with commodities staged in the World Exhibitions of the 1850s and 60s; GS V:50ff.,
Refl.: 151ff.; compare Konvolut G, GS V: 232ff.), and the underlying aim of the entire
Arcades Project was to explode such phantasmagoria. Generally speaking, it may be
suggested that Benjamin realized, perhaps more succinctly than any other Marxist thinker
of his time, that an effective intervention in the existing order of capitalist economy and
social relations would have to target precisely this level of affectively charged
mystification. But the question remains: how is it, actually, that the practice of the true
collector, as opposed to the bourgeois collector, contributes to exploding the commodity
fetish?

To shed light on this question, which is in essence the question of how to
comprehend the redemptive / political nature of Benjamin’s anamnestic intervention in the
realm of material culture, we need to pick up the thread from above and examine the way in
which memory figures in the practice of the collector. In Konvolut H, Benjamin expressly
defines collecting as a “form of practical remembrance” (GS V: 271; H 1a, 2). My basic
contention is that this observation is closely linked to the question concerning the
differentiation between the two incarnations of the collector, the suggestion being that a
central factor distinguishing the genuine collector from his bourgeois counterpart is the
form of memory with which he surrounds the objects in his possession. Although he never
states this point openly, there is no shortage of textual indication that Benjamin associates
the genuine collector with the structuring principle of the mémoire involontaire (namely a
certain “productive disorder”) as opposed to the classificatory principle of voluntary
memory (GS V: 280; H 5, 1). To bring this out, we only need to note the extent to which the
collector’s ability to forge an intimate relation with the object of his possession rests on an
ability to approach the latter as a trigger of involuntary memory. This connection is unmistakable in numerous passages, such as when Benjamin speaks of "the spring tide of memory which surges towards any collector as he contemplates his possessions" (GS IV:388; Ill.:60). Clearly, this "chaos of memories" (ibid.) pertains to an experience that is entirely different from the controlled, purpose-oriented process of voluntary memory. It is therefore not surprising that Benjamin associates the event of unpacking his library with the night and the process of dreaming rather than with waking thought: "Once you have approached the mountain of cases in order to mine the books from them and bring them to the light of day - or, rather, of night - what memories crowd in upon you!" (GS IV:394; Ill.:66). Ultimately, it is its association with a deep fund of involuntary memory that constitutes the object as unique and places the collector in a position to view it as the "scene of its fate." The myriad of emerging memory images form what Benjamin calls "a magic encyclopaedia" that allows the collector to contextualize the object in new, unexpected ways: "Everything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property" (GS IV:389; Ill.:60; Compare GS V:274f.; H 2,7).

If we now compare this vision of how the collector "as he ought to be" mobilizes memory in his relation to the object of his possession with the practice of the bourgeois collector, the difference is immediately apparent, for whereas the former treats objects and the sensation they evoke as a passage to an entire layer of suppressed experience, the latter

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155 Compare the very end of the essay, where Benjamin remarks: "Now I am on the last half-emptied case and it is way past midnight. Other thoughts fill me than the ones I am talking about - not thoughts but images, memories ..." (GS IV:395f.; Ill.:67).
treats his most treasured possessions as objects of projection, i.e. as props for the staging of a preconceived identity.\textsuperscript{156} This, we may surmise, is essentially what is implied by the notion of the “connoisseur value” of the object. Souvenirs and other elements of the bourgeois interior do not actually function as triggers of involuntary memory - as Proust’s narrator Marcel painfully discovered! All they set in motion is the process of voluntary memory that Marcel found to be infertile and useless for the purpose of writing. Transposed to Benjamin’s context, the objects of the bourgeois interior, when embedded in that context, possess no subversive force. What is lacking is the negative aspect of involuntary memory, i.e. the ability of heterogeneous objects to unravel ideological narratives. Herein, I submit, lies a decisive factor distinguishing the two versions of the collector.

Having pinpointed this distinction, however, the critical question that has been following us throughout this section reappears with renewed force: Is the association of the genuine collector with the power of involuntary memory sufficient to counter his regressive tendency? Is it, in other words, sufficient to allow him to effectively meet the challenge of overcoming commodification and reification? Stated in a nutshell the problem is that even when treating objects in his possession as triggers of Eingedenken, the “true” collector stands in danger of mirroring his bourgeois counterpart by only exceptionally exempting certain privileged objects from the drudgery of commodification and utility. In response to a general leveling of material culture, he restores the aura of the privileged object but only

\textsuperscript{156} This tendency recurs (or is already evident) in the figure of the brooder, who, as Pensky notes “bears a contradictory relation to things, because the things themselves are cherished, collected, poured over, and thus saved from oblivion, but only insofar as they are devalued, that is, transformed into dry ciphers for the enigmatic satisfaction of the brooder’s own subjective intention” (Pensky 1996:172).
in a shielded sphere of esoteric appreciation. This is exactly what the culture of high art does, and as Benjamin himself observes in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, it is ultimately a regressive strategy. The restoration of the aura in a secluded realm of autonomous art is neither immune to fascist usurpation, nor does it effectively resist commodification and reification as such. It merely presents an exception that confirms commodification as norm. A further - related - concern is that the practice of collecting, by creating a privileged context for certain select objects mirroring the identity of the collector comes to close in upon itself and thus to become merely compensatory in a manner similar to what I have earlier called “anamnestic escapism.” What, ultimately, is it about the anamnestic practice of Benjamin’s collector that escapes this trap? Or is he actually capable of escaping it?

To settle this question, it will be helpful once again to take a step back and note that reification and commodification are widely perceived by Marxist thinkers (in a tradition postdating Benjamin!) to carry the connotation of a *social forgetting*. In an aphorism called “Le Prix du Progrès” from *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno state in a widely quoted phrase in that “all reification is a forgetting” (“Alle Verdinglichung ist ein Vergessen”; Adorno & Horkheimer 1969:244). This may be taken to involve two moments which mutually imply one another: on the one hand, a forgetting of what is unique and dignified in the human being but, on the other hand, also a forgetting of past wrongs, the violence perpetrated in the name of progress. In the study titled *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, historian Richard Terdiman extends this theorem to a general pathology of social amnesia that is directly linked with the economic base. With reference
to Horkheimer and Adorno he proposes that "[e]ssentially, 'reification' is a memory disturbance: the enigma of the commodity is a memory disorder." He then goes on to explain that "[t]he experience of commodification and the process of reification cut entities off from their own history. They veil the memory of their production from their consumers, as from the very people who produced them" (Terdiman 1993:12, italics in the original).

The underlying idea here is that because it no longer relies on the exercise of brute power but rather on the willing cooperation of the masses (in their capacity of citizens, laborers, consumers, etc.), capitalism needs to obscure its mechanisms of exploitation, and social relations in general, in a way that feudalism did not. Interestingly, Benjamin articulates a similar insight when he notes that the object of craft (which is the core economic unit of the feudalist economy) retains the fingerprints of its maker: "the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (GS II:447; III:92). This is no longer the case when it comes to industrially produced commodities, the implication being that the capitalist economy is premised on a forgetting lodged in the material object itself. Essentially, the commodity is an object without a past.

In this light we need to ask: what would it take to effectively oppose the forgetting that is intrinsic to the reduction of the material object to commodity? The most immediate answer is that the object needs to be constituted as a site of memory. Indeed, this was our point of departure, as it is the approach adopted by Benjamin's collector. Yet as we have subsequently come to realize, it is not an entirely satisfactory answer, for even the collector "as he ought to be" stands in danger of treating his prized possessions as the exception that confirms commodification as a rule (or as a sanctuary in which to escape the general
impoverishment of experience). The upshot of this recurrent objection may well be that the dilemma at hand cannot be resolved in the manner in which it is stated. Even in *Unpacking My Library*, which is the piece most wholeheartedly devoted to presenting to figure of the collector in positive terms, Benjamin registers an irreducible regressive moment in this character:

I know that the time is running out for the type that I am discussing here and have been presenting before you a bit *ex officio*. But, as Hegel put it, only when it is dark does the owl of Minerva begin its flight. Only in extinction is the collector comprehended. (GS IV:395; Ill.:67)

Accordingly, Benjamin’s way out of the dilemma consists, beyond a certain point, in actually abandoning the figure of the collector. He responds, in other words, to the endemic regressive moment in the figure of the collector by complementing the interpretation of his critical function with an examination of certain related but alternative practices, i.e. forms of material culture that decisively exceed the horizon of the collector in the more or less conventional incarnation in which he is otherwise presented by Benjamin. It will be found that this is not so much a matter of abandoning the characteristic activity of the collector as rather rethinking the *nature of the objects* towards which it is directed.

In the world of things, there are some objects that cannot be constituted as affirmative, but which by their very nature expose the underlying thrust of commodification and ideological projection. These are the *ruins* of civilization, or, as Benjamin sometimes puts it, “the trivia, the trash” ("die Lumpen, den Abfall," GS V:574, N 1a,8). A primary example of such radically heterogeneous objects is the outmoded fashion object, i.e. the commodity that has dropped out of the sphere of retail and consumption not because it has
been "rescued" but because it is no longer desirable. Like the fashion object proper, this exposes the structure of fetishization - but in a sad state, as a static, compulsive, unrealizable quest for the perpetually new. Confronting the out-of-date advertisement has a similar effect (GS V:1041, cf. Pensky 1996:166). Objects of this nature are not ordinarily bestowed the honour of being included in a private collection and thus of being treated as carriers of a unique fate. But if they were, the dysphoric experience that they embody would be brought to the fore. The remembrance triggered by the material object would thereby emerge as a remembrance of the very dimension of social forgetting upon which the economy is premised. This, we might surmise, would count as an exercise of the weak messianic power which, while not capable of undoing past wrongs, at least recognizes distortion for what it is.

By thus retaining the impulse of the collector towards redeeming objects but at the same time transposing it to a different sphere, Benjamin's collector mutates into a collector of refuse - a rag picker. Only in this reincarnation does he decisively shed his affinity with the material culture of the bourgeoisie, and in so doing he accomplishes what the Benjaminian collector from the outset was committed to doing, namely to expose the moment of otherness in homogenous narratives and public symbols of progress. Precisely this is the blind spot of the legacy of nineteenth century material remembrance that Benjamin subjects to an immanent critique. The thrust of his intervention is nicely summed up in a remark on the notion of rescue:

From what are phenomena rescued? Not just, or not so much, from the ill-repute and contempt into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophic way in which they are very often portrayed by a certain form of transmission, by their "value as
heritage." - They are rescued by the demonstration of the fissures in them. (GS V:591, N 9,4)

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In light of this interpretation of the figure of the collector, it is possible to summarize the second moment of Eingedenken, in particular as it relates to material culture but also more broadly, as a strategy of taking things out of context. Paradoxically, the decline of Erfahrung as a solid context within which to integrate Erlebnisse facilitates this strategy, indeed makes it possible, and the rag picker “searching for truth in the garbage heap” (Buck-Morss 1990:217) consummates it. Decontextualization is the driving force behind the negative moment of Eingedenken; it aims not at the reconstruction of an integrated context, as it attempted by the bourgeois collector installing the objects of his possession in a self-affirming interior, but rather at a juxtaposition of incompatibles in which each object retains its quality of heterogeneity - like the Surrealist meeting of the umbrella and the sewing machine on the operating table.

This is a theme with many variations in Benjamin’s life and work. Aside from being the model of strategic intervention pursued by the “genuine” collector, it is how quotations are intended to function in Benjamin’s text: “To write history,” Benjamin stipulates, “means to quote history. But the concept of quotation implies that any given historical
object must be ripped out of its context” (GS V:595, N 11,3).\textsuperscript{157} Similarly, the method of
decontextualization and juxtaposition characterizes the aesthetic techniques of collage and
montage with which Benjamin himself experimented in several of his prose pieces (notably
One-Way Street composed during the mid-1920s). Coming at the same motif from a
different angle, the attainment of a particular astuteness and poignancy from operating out
of context is the unsolicited strength of the intellectual in exile - i.e. exactly the figure with
which Benjamin was forced to identify himself during the 1930s. All of these practices,
devices and circumstances position the intellectual to face up to the essential task of the
historical materialist as defined in On the Concept of History, namely that of seizing “a
revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” by “blast[ing] 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” (GS I:703; thesis 17). This overall pattern of intervention, which
ultimately is about different ways of exercising the mimetic ability, recognizing moments
of otherness in a sudden flash, points to the final moment of Eingedenken. This is the
moment of interruption, which has already from the outset been anticipated as a necessary
correction to the interpretation of remembrance as ecstatic flow.

\textsuperscript{157} Compare Konvolut H 2,3, where a similar quality is attributed to the anecdote
(GS V:273).
Chapter 6

Awakening: the apocalyptic moment

Can it be that waking is the synthesis of dream consciousness as thesis and awakened consciousness as antithesis? Then the moment of waking would be identical with the "moment of recognition," in which things put on their true - surrealistic - face. Thus, in Proust, the importance of committing the whole of life to its ultimate dialectical breaking point - waking. (GS V:579, N 3a,3)

Completing the concept of Eingedenken - the problematic third

If, to recapitulate, the depiction of remembrance as an ecstatic flow is identified as the positive moment of Eingedenken and the various sobering aspects centered around the exercise of the mimetic ability and the interventions in the realm of material culture accentuate its negative moment, then it is still necessary to add a third moment to the concept. This is the moment of interruption proper, which was not actually derived but only anticipated in the last chapter. Adding a third moment to the concept of Eingedenken immediately raises the question of how this relates to the two previous moments. To what
extent are earlier positions and articulations sublated and oppositions resolved? I suggest that Benjamin does at various junctures probe a logic of sublation. We have seen evidence of this, e.g., in the analysis of the dialectic of ecstasis and sobriety and will in the present chapter encounter a further variation on the same theme in relation to the inter-penetration of dream and awakening. A more pronounced trait of Benjamin’s thinking is his propensity for sudden dialectical reversals aimed at a continual correction of inadequately stated positions. This too will continue to play an important role in the final phase of my exposition of the concept of Eingedenken. But the decisive motif of Benjamin’s dialectics is that of constellations of unreconciled tension appearing to the thinker in a sudden flash, sometimes at the result of a careful construction of oppositions. These constellations do not involve an Aufhebung in the Hegelian sense but rather display a pattern of paradoxical hybridity and unresolved tension such as we have repeatedly encountered in the opposition pairs structuring Benjamin’s analysis. In essence, the refusal of mediation and resolution is what is indicated by Benjamin’s unorthodox notion of “dialectics at a standstill.” One way of picturing the seemingly oxymoronic notion of a static, yet tension-laden third is in analogy with a magnifying glass that concentrates the force of both previous moments into a focal point where objective energies or tensions converge and hover at the point of ignition. Such flammable focal points, as it were, correspond to what Benjamin calls dialectical images, and the critical conceptual challenge in relation to the last moment of Eingedenken consists in clarifying the manner in which a politics of memory can harness the power of the dialectical image.

A central motif in Benjamin’s writing epitomizing the third moment of
Eingedenken is the motif of *awakening*. Needless to say, this is a notion that carries a wide range of existential, political, and theological connotations, and clearly Benjamin is intent upon exploiting these, not least by orchestrating a complex interplay between the different levels. But an alternate designation which in my analysis is equally suited to capturing the thrust of the final moment of Eingedenken is that it may be thought of as *apocalyptic*.

Although nowhere employed by Benjamin himself, this theological trope is widely invoked by Benjamin commentators and furnishes a powerful expression of the final moment of Eingedenken. Etymologically, the notion of the apocalypse implies an "uncovering," which may be directly associated with the ability of involuntary memory to facilitate the reappearance of a submerged, forgotten past. By the same token, the apocalypse signals a moment of truth in which the remembering subject suddenly confronts a revealing image of him- or herself. But concomitant with these positive aspects, the notion of the apocalypse also brings into play the negative, destructive aspects of Eingedenken. This is apparent in its association with the *Day of Judgement* which, indeed, is a salient trope in Benjamin’s late writing. The underlying idea is that our confrontation with a forgotten past, the moment when all things will finally be laid bare, is also to be thought of as a moment of settling accounts. Thus the apocalypse marks the end of the old order of things but at the same time a messianic transition to a new order and a new concept of practice.

In order to elaborate these implications, I begin the chapter with a closer examination of Benjamin’s notion of awakening. In extension of this, I pick up the theme of mastering the involuntary by establishing that the practice of Eingedenken to Benjamin is

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ultimately a matter of seizing dialectical images. This leads, in turn, to an elaboration of the notion of the dialectical image, both in its own right and in terms of its individual, existential implications. The final conceptual development to be examined in this chapter has to do with transposing the apocalyptic/redemptive function of memory to the public realm and to the level of collective subjectivity. The ability to accomplish this has decisive implications for harnessing Eingedenken as a political force, yet it will be found that the shift from individual to collective subjectivity in some ways marks the most problematic and contentious moment of Benjamin’s philosophy of memory. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of how this transition is to be understood, and in a broader sense how the mobilization of Eingedenken in the political arena epitomizes Benjamin’s commitment to a radically negative theology at the intersection of history and politics.

The concept of awakening

Dialectical structure of awakening: remembering and awakening are most intimately related. Awakening, namely, is the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance. It is an eminently composed reversal of the world of the dreamer into the world of the waking. (GS V:1058)

Numerous threads of Benjamin’s intervention in the philosophy of memory and history come together in the concept of awakening. In as much as Eingedenken has a dream-like quality, awakening naturally signals its interruption. This, in Benjamin’s conceptualization, is to be understood as an integral moment of Eingedenken itself; it is the
moment of dialectical reversal that "completes" the concept, not in such a manner that opposites are reconciled with the effect of facilitating a continuous process of conceptual mediation and integration, but rather such that thinking comes to a halt in a particular constellation pregnant with tensions (GS I:702f., III.:262, thesis 17). When understood in this way, the motif of awakening also marks the culmination of the sobering moment and the moment when the object of Eingedenken is constituted as determinate. To Benjamin this happens in the form of an image which returns the remembering subject to him- or herself. From the point of view of the phenomenology of modernity, this constitutes an intervention against the trivialization of experience and may be seen as prefiguring an overcoming of alienation. In terms of intervening in the politics of the past, the same motif of awakening is invested with radical implications concerning our ability to picture the collective subject as an agent of history.

In setting about to clarify these implications, we need to note that Benjamin's basic model for what it is like to awaken is rather unusual. Ordinarily, the notion of an awakening is associated with a shift from one mental state to another, i.e. from clouded to lucid thinking. On this account, it carries the connotation of dispelling illusion. This is the effect pursued by ideology critique and more broadly, one might suggest, by all "enlightenment" strategies (reaching as far back as to Plato). Prima facie it would appear that Benjamin employs the trope of awakening in this sense as well. Certainly one hears echoes of an "enlightenment" agenda in the idea of puncturing phantasmagoria and similarly in his commitment to unraveling the tangled web of ideology, as has been identified as a primary aim of the sobering moment of Eingedenken. Generally speaking, the liquidationist
dimension of Benjamin’s critical thinking, as personified by “the destructive character,” is conceived as a foray of reason into the territory of myth. Konvolut N carries a remarkable entry to this effect:

To clear the fields, where until now only delusion ran rampant. Forge ahead with the whetted axe of reason, looking neither to the left nor the right, in order not to fall victim to the horror beckoning from the depths of the primeval forest. At a certain point, reason must clear the entire ground and rid it of the undergrowth of delusion and myth. Such is the goal here for the nineteenth century. (GS V:570f., N 1.4)

This is relatively standard. But if one attends to Benjamin’s manner of dispelling myth, one finds that the trope of awakening is attributed an expanded and somewhat unusual meaning. His concern is not primarily the shift to lucid thinking as a fait accompli but rather the moment of transition itself. The central question is what happens during the twilight period when one is no longer immersed in the dream but not quite awake either. Precisely this, to Benjamin, is the moment of awakening. It is an intermediate state in which one begins to regain one’s bearings while still holding threads of the dream and not yet being locked into the limited and limiting horizon of intentionality and voluntary memory. When conceived in this way, the notion of awakening also sublates the positive, i.e. ecstatic moment of Eingedenken. Proust marks a similar point by beginning his great novel with a depiction of the time during countless restless nights when memory would aid him in reconstructing a sense of self out of multiple layers of submerged consciousness:

... when I awoke in the middle of the night, not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal’s consciousness; I was more destitute than a cave-dweller; but then the memory - not yet of the place of which I was, but of various other places
where I had lived and might now very possibly be - *would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being*, from which I could never have escaped by myself: in a flash I would traverse centuries of civilization, and out of a blurred glimpse of oil-lamps, then of shirts with turned-down collars, *would gradually piece together the original components of my ego.* (Proust 1981, vol. I:5-6, emphasis added)

Benjamin notes this compositional measure with approval: "Just as Proust begins his life story with the moment of awakening," he submits, "so must every presentation of history begin with awakening; in fact, it should deal with nothing else" (GS V:580, N 4,3). He then goes on to suggest with reference to his own *Arcades Project* that "*[t]his [presentation of history] deals with awakening from the nineteenth century*" (ibid.).

By repeatedly invoking the notion of an awakening *from* the nineteenth century, Benjamin unmistakably depicts the latter epoch - the epoch of high capitalism and bourgeois culture - as a slumbering condition from which critical thinking must emerge. Indeed, this is the central aim of the *Passagenwerk*, which Benjamin at one point characterizes as "an attempt at the technique of awakening" (GS V:490, K 1,1). But the link between the project of awakening and the legacy of bourgeois culture is not simply about disbanding the latter. It is premised on an understanding of the nineteenth century not only, or not primarily, as an epoch of history but rather as a context of *prehistory*. As has been discussed in *Chapter 3*, this characterization involves a dual aspect. "Prehistory" in Benjamin’s usage invariably denotes a context of myth and delusion (similar to the standard Marxian connotations of the term), but in keeping with its dream-like quality it is always
also a source of creative, potentially progressive energies. The idea of awakening from the nineteenth century involves both of these aspects. In the conventional sense it implies a dispelling of illusion - perhaps an overcoming of false consciousness in the manner of ideology critique - which is what Benjamin accentuates when speaking of awakening from the nightmare of the nineteenth century. But in the expanded sense, awakening must at the same time be understood as a matter of releasing the energies stored up in bourgeois culture, i.e. realizing its latent potential by taking elements of the most recent past (das Jüngstvergangene) up into the present, not in the distorted form in which they have come down to us but somehow transformed.

Articulated in relation to Eingedenken, the moment of awakening is a privileged moment because it marks a unique, albeit fleeting, window of opportunity in which the creative resource that has been made accessible by involuntary memory can be seized and taken up into waking consciousness. Benjamin describes this "dialectical turn of remembrance" (GS V:1058) as an "eminently composed reversal of the world of the dreamer into the world of the waking" (ibid.), and goes so far as to present this as a model

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159 On this point, Adorno persistently disagreed; he saw no progressive potential in the dream-like quality of modern mass culture but rather warned Benjamin that the "crossroads of magic and positivism" that his thinking occupies is a "bewitched location" (Corr.:582).

160 In his writings associated with the Passagenwerk, Benjamin employs this notion as generally synonymous with "capitalism" and with "the nineteenth century." These epochal labels are in turn closely associated with "myth," which Lindner identifies as "the indicator for the ambiguous and contradictory co-existence of the return of the archaic and economic technological upheaval, liquidation of experience (Erfahrung) and intensification of the social image-space, (anthropological) materialism and (failed) revolution" (Lindner 1986:39f.).
of critical thinking as such. He states that "the utilization of dream elements upon awakening is the canon of dialectics. It is an example for the thinker and an exigency for the historian" (GS V:580, N 4.4).\textsuperscript{161} Awakening in this sense is not an event that occurs in extension of Eingedenken but is rather an integral part of Benjamin's concept of memory. It is the dialectical transition that sublates the prior moments - much as the ascending or surfacing motion implied by awakening reverses the characteristic topology of submersion while retaining its effects.\textsuperscript{162} The critical point is that both motions are indispensable. The shift itself is decisive, and this, ultimately, is why the concept of Eingedenken could not be stated in simple, unambiguous terms but had to be presented in stages, as composite.

Seizing an image

In order to further illuminate the dialectical structure of Benjamin's concept of memory, we need to examine more closely the final moment of transition; in other words,

\textsuperscript{161} In \textit{Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century} Benjamin concludes by stating that: "The realization of dream elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thinking" V:59, Refl.:162).

\textsuperscript{162} At this juncture Benjamin's dialectic does undeniably display a certain Hegelian structure, but rather than being subject to a thrust towards reconciling differences, the final moment of Eingedenken will be found to further accentuate the negative aspect of the concept that was brought out at the second stage of conceptual development (e.g., the unraveling inherent in every anamnestic weaving). In \textit{On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections}, Wohlfarth too compares Benjamin's triadic scheme with the Hegelian logic of Aufhebung (1978:186ff.) and reaches the conclusion that a distinctive feature of Benjamin's dialectic is its continued accentuation of the second moment (which in Wohlfarth's context is configured as a moment of fragmentation - "the broken mirror image of Truth;" ibid.:196).
how to conceive of “awakening” as a moment of interruption that retains both the positive and negative aspects of Eingedenken? To shed light on this it is important to note that the twilight state of awakening, qua culmination of the sobering thrust of Eingedenken, also marks the phase during which the object of involuntary memory becomes determinate to the remembering subject. Thus, even if the anamnestic descent into the underworld is about probing an amorphous and indefinite whole (GS II:323, Ill.:214), something identifiable and retainable crystallizes in the process. This may be a particular event or string of events, a face or an object; in all cases, Benjamin refers to such memory fragments as images - sometimes as dialectical images and sometimes also as monads. What is implied by these notions will be elaborated presently, but in relation to the general trope of awakening it is relevant to first take note of the basic fact that to Benjamin the image is the form in which elements of the dream can be taken up into waking consciousness. In this respect Benjamin departs from Proust, whose primary approach to the challenge of seizing the involuntary consisted in recapturing the thrust and structure of involuntary memory in writing (viewed both as a process and as a finished product). Benjamin’s intervention, by contrast, consists in interrupting the very process of interlacing images and events by jolting the mind to pause before a particular image fraught with tension. Thus, whereas Proust reconstructs the object of Eingedenken in a narrative form, Benjamin establishes as one of the five main premises of his “basic doctrine [Elementarlehre] of historical materialism” that “history decomposes into images, not into narratives” (GS V:595f., N 11,4).\^163 Buck-Morss has

\^163 To this theorem Kittsteiner remarks that “the one is, strictly speaking, as incorrect as the other. ‘History’ disintegrates neither into images nor histories; it doesn’t disintegrate at all, but rather asserts itself as a collective singular with a material substratum
underscored this point by characterizing Benjamin's method as "a dialectics of seeing," which she also associates with a non-linear logic (Buck-Morss 1990:218).

Although Benjamin thus distances himself somewhat from Proust's manner of exercising the mimetic ability (not least on the grounds of his mistrust of the restorational impulse that guides it, so I have suggested), his own "attempt at the technique of awakening" (GS V:490, K1,1) must be viewed as part of the same underlying endeavour to master the involuntary. Fundamentally, the act of retaining memory images as they appear in the twilight zone between dreaming and awaking is an act of volition, an interjection of deliberate practice into the ecstatic flow of involuntary memory. Whereas the initial phase of involuntary memory is conceived in terms of a practice of self-abandonment, the moment of interruption is explicitly associated with gestures of self-assertion.\footnote{164} This thrust - which stands in stark contrast to the language of weakness that otherwise permeates Benjamin's prose and thus in effect signals a dismantling of any simple opposition between strength and weakness\footnote{165} - is particularly pronounced in a variety of passages employing aggressive imagery, such as the metaphor of "blasting open" the continuum of history or "ripping" fragments out of context. But the same basic connotation is also conveyed by the notion of a rescue. As Benjamin stipulates: "Rescue includes the firm, apparently brutal grasp" (GS V:592, N 9a,3). To seize an image is a matter of taking charge and asserting agency in a situation of unique possibility, which in Benjamin's manner of thinking also

\footnote{164}{Compare Buck-Morss 1990:249ff.}

\footnote{165}{This general theme was already encountered in Chapter 3 in connection with the aspect of cunning associated with Benjamin's strategy of mimetic intervention.}
needs to be viewed as a moment of danger. In thesis 5 of *On the Concept of History* this point is stated generally in relation to the philosophy of history: “The true picture of the past flits by. Only as an image [Bild], which flashes up at the moment of its recognizability [Erkennbarkeit] never to be seen again, is the past to be seized [ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten]” (GS I:695, Ill.:255). In thesis 6, the link to the practice of Eingedenken is then made explicit: “To articulate the past historically means to seize hold of [sich bemächtigen] a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (ibid.).

Fundamentally, the act of seizing a memory image is a matter of exercising the mimetic ability and recognizing correspondences. As has already been indicated, this anamnestic practice yields what Benjamin calls *dialectical* images. Given the fact that dialectics in the Hegelian and Marxist tradition is emphatically a matter of dynamic conceptual thinking rather than static imagistic thinking (Vorstellung), the very notion of a “dialectical image” - like the attendant notion of “dialectics at a standstill” - is deliberately paradoxical and calls for some words of explication.

As I understand it, the notion of the dialectical image carries two important connotations. The first is that it is an image in which the constituent moments interrelate in such a manner that objective social oppositions gel and come to a point. An entry in Konvolut N of the *Passagenwerk* conveys this basic determination by establishing that “[w]here thought comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions, there appears the dialectical image” (GS V:595, N 10a,3). This is the connection in which Benjamin develops his notion of *illumination* as the aim of critical inquiry, the idea being that the polarity inherent within the dialectical image creates an intellectual force field in
which sparks will jump and suddenly illuminate the surrounding terrain. "The dialectical image is a lightening flash," he states at one point (GS V:591f., N 9,7).

A closely related thought-motif is that the dialectical image displays the character of a monad. The direct implication of this is that it is conceived as the part or fragment that reflects the whole. In his Trauerspiel study, Benjamin had already developed a theory of monads in relation to his concept of the idea. Here the monad is characterized as "an indistinct [verdunkelte] abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas" (GS I:228, OGT:47) and the representation of ideas is accordingly, in accordance with Benjamin's characteristic micrological method (Adorno 1983:236), identified as "a question of penetrating so deeply into everything real as to reveal thereby an objective interpretation of the world" (GS I:228, OGT:48). In much the same spirit (but now expressed in a jargon more congenial to his materialist turn), Benjamin sets himself in his preparations for the Passagenwerk to "to detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, individual moment" (GS V:575, N 2,6). This in turn suggests that it is possible to unpack or unfold the dialectical image (which, incidentally, might be seen as the most direct counterpart in Benjamin's thinking to the Proustian interweaving of images and events). The dialectical image is

166 Compare: "The idea is monad - that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world" (GS I:228; OGT:48).

167 According to Ernst Bloch, precisely this was one of Benjamin's own greatest strengths as an intellectual. In his Recollections of Walter Benjamin he attributes to Benjamin the trait that "Lukacs so drastically lacked: a unique gaze for the significant detail, for what lies alongside, for those fresh elements which, in thinking and in the world, arise from here, for the individual things (Einzelsein) which intrude in an unaccustomed and nonschematic way, things which do not fit into the usual lot and therefore deserve particular, decisive attention" (Bloch, quoted in G. Smith (ed.) 1991:340).
inherently expansive, and this once again highlights the capacity of Eingedenken to “illuminate” a given social and political situation.

The second main implication of defining certain images as dialectical, as I understand Benjamin, concerns the underlying structure of temporality. Among Benjamin commentators a general tendency seems to be to assume that the dialectical image by definition involves a time differential. It is, in other words, constituted by a correspondence between past and present.168 Certainly there are many passages in Benjamin’s writing that appear to support this interpretation. The fragment cited above invoking the image of a lightening flash, e.g., directly continues as follows: “The Then must be held fast as it flashes its lightening image in the Now of recognizability [Erkennbarkeit]” (GS V:591f., N 9,7; emphasis added). Not coincidentally, virtually the same language is employed with reference to Eingedenken: “The image of the past flashing in the Now of its recognizability is, according to its wider definition, an image of Eingedenken” (GS I:1243). However, there are also many examples of dialectical images in Benjamin’s prose that display no reference to the past, so in order to clarify the temporal structure of the dialectical image it may be helpful to pause for a moment and examine this apparent confusion.

An instructive example of a dialectical image that involves no obvious temporal dimension is the figure of the prostitute, whom Benjamin characterizes as being

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168McCole thus makes reference to a passage in which Benjamin invokes a “time differential” as integral to the dialectical image (GS V:1038) and goes on to suggest as a general rule that “[a] dialectical image is one that results from the reciprocal relationship between two discrete historical moments” (McCole 1993:249). Gilloch, similarly, characterizes the dialectical image as “the point of intersection of the ‘here and now’ and the ‘then and there’” (Gilloch 1996:114).
“saleswoman and wares in one” (GS V:55, Refl.:157). In this description the prostitute epitomizes reification and yet claims for herself a degree of agency that is otherwise denied by patriarchy and bourgeois female oppression. What is at stake for Benjamin in casting the prostitute as a dialectical image is obviously that her plight accentuates the violence perpetrated against humanity under capitalism. But it is more than this; it is also a matter of identifying with the unfulfilled potential of the persona in question, with her surreptitious strength (in the case of the prostitute also the distracted alertness that is honed by being on constant look-out for the police; GS I:649, Ill.:191) and with the moment of aspiration that is being denied.

In this latter respect, Benjamin’s dialectical investment in a contemporary figure such as the prostitute reveals itself after all to be closely related to the temporality of Eingedenken. For what is at stake in establishing an anamnestic correspondence between past and present is very much a matter of identifying with unfulfilled longings and recognizing the aspirations of victims of past oppression as concerns of one’s own. Indeed, Benjamin goes so far as to stipulate that the past has a claim on the present in this regard - a claim that cannot be settled cheaply! (GS I:694, Ill.:254, thesis 2). Countless variations on this theme of a “secret” temporal index by which the past is referred to redemption (ibid.) are found Benjamin’s prose in the form of an abiding preoccupation with wishes, promises, hopes, and dreams as motifs pointing any present to a utopian future. Failure and missed opportunities - and especially the failure to realize revolutionary possibilities - in a certain sense carry the same orientation since the lack of realization keeps the hopes and claims
alive (if only in a dormant form).169

The progressive moment in all of these modalities of anticipation consists in their faithfulness to a messianic perspective, which in any given context functions as critical leverage against the status quo. This is precisely what Eingedenken seeks out when “fanning the sparks of hope in the past” (GS I:695, Ill.:255, thesis 6). In a peculiar time warp, Benjarninian remembrance is a search for the future located in the past; in other words, a search for the messianic future of previous historical moments. Wohlfarth elaborates this paradoxical structure of temporality by identifying Benjamin’s notion of the messianic future, “Paradise,” as “a ‘present anterior’ or future perfect, a world which will have always already taken place, rather than a purely self-sufficient, self-defining, timeless state” (Wohlfarth 1989:179f.). In relation to this, Eingedenken assumes the character of an inverse prophecy - a form of prophecy that paradoxically looks towards the past.170 By “telescoping the past through the present” (GS V:588, N 7a,3), it enables us to see certain moments of the past with particular clarity and recognize such moments as our own immediate concern - what Benjamin describes as an actualization (Vergegenwärtigung; GS

169 Compare the dictum at the opening of Adorno’s Negative Dialectics: “Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment of its realization was missed” (“Philosophie, die einmal überholt schien, erhält sich am Leben, weil der Augenblick ihrer Verwirklichung versäumt ward;” Adorno 1975:15).

170 The image of the historian as “a prophet facing backwards” is one that Benjamin adopts from the romantic philologist Schlegel (McCole 1993:274). However, in a preparatory sketch for the historico-philosophical theses, he makes a point of keeping it distinct from a past-minded orientation that seeks to understand how a given past epoch has led to a future developments that have in the meanwhile also become past (GS I:1237). This is the historicist method of empathy that leads to a conception of history as fate and hence a feeling of paralysis vis a vis political challenges in the present.
V:1238). But this is just one side of an asymmetrical two-way relationship (cf. McCole 1993:248ff.), because in so doing, we also come to reverse the perspective and view our own situation from the point of view of the past. In certain privileged moments, we may catch a glimpse of something important about ourselves as prefigured by the memory object. As Benjamin notes, “memory, like ultraviolet rays, shows each of us the writing in the book of life that invisibly glossed the text as prophecy” (GS IV:142). But the critical point is that rather than merely confirming a complacent self-image, the image furnished by Eingedenken invariably exposes dysphoria and unrealized potentials. When properly framed, the juxtaposition of past and present facilitates a dialectical mediation that is not a transition but rather a unique moment of correspondence that forces thinking to pause and take stock of the current possibilities for a redemption (in the form of recognition, perhaps even rectification and realization) of past aspirations frustrated by wrong.¹⁷¹

Exploiting the power of the dialectical image

Such is the nature of Benjamin’s intervention in the politics of the past. Reduced to a formula, it may be suggested that the tension inherent in the dialectical image is one

¹⁷¹ Interestingly, the ambiguity expounded here about how to relate to portentous moments in the past mirrors the ambiguity encountered at the end of Chapter 5 concerning the manner in which different incarnations of the collector relate to the object of their possession. The bourgeois collector allows his possessions to merely confirm a pre-established self-image, and precisely this, to Benjamin, is what marks his approach to material culture as fundamentally regressive. The “true” collector, by contrast, relates to the “liberated” object as a reservoir of experience exceeding individuation and, at the same time, as an allegory of emancipated subjectivity.
between the promise it contains and the lack of fulfilment. In this respect it resembles the elements of ideology targeted by the classical (Hegelian) Marxist strategy of ideology critique, but contrary to the latter, Benjamin’s intervention reverses the perspective of progress and locates the normative standard by which the present is to be guided in images of the past. This is necessary, so it might be suggested, due to an objective degeneration of ideology by the time of the inter-war years and due to a continual neutralization of utopian / critical potential. In response to this, Benjamin asserts a radicalized orientation towards the past as a means to activate the present. Yet the manner of this activation as well as its characteristic aporia still need to be critically probed.

We have in the course of reconstructing the concept of Eingedenken encountered several examples of exploiting the power of the dialectical image. To Benjamin, the outmoded fashion object is a dialectical image that exposes the novel and intensely desirable object as trivial and merely more of the same. This is purported to cast a glaring light on the commodity fetish while at the same time releasing the libidinal energy invested in it. Commodities are inherently ambiguous - and hence potentially explosive when ripped out of context - due to their contradictory status as sites of both forgetting and desire. The ruins of civilization are perceived in a similar way, i.e., not only as monuments to the triumphs and accomplishments of the past (to which the elites of the present are heirs) but at the same time as reminders of an undercurrent of exploitation, resistance and disintegration which interrupts any attempt at a seamless projection of the status quo into the future.

Articulated in general terms, the force of the dialectical image has to do with its dual
status as both redemptive and subversive. It comprises both the positive and the negative moment of Eingedenken or, coming at the same matter from a different angle, both of the two thrusts of Benjamin's critical thinking that were highlighted separately by Habermas and Tiedemann. We shall find that the dialectical image in Benjamin's conception is attributed a powerful impact both at the individual and the collective level. As the determinate manifestation of an ecstatic memory flow it is intensely personal, yet paradoxically it serves the function of rupturing the interiority of remembrance (so strongly emphasized by Hegel) that is constitutive of bourgeois subjectivity and that Proust is incapable of escaping despite his keen perception of a decenring of the subject.

To elaborate these implications will involve a closer examination of Benjamin's use of theological tropes and the manner in which they constitute Eingedenken as a political force. I shall begin by examining the notion of remembrance as redemptive at the individual level - what I call the existential implications of seizing an image. Next I consider how Benjamin mobilizes variations of the same basic motif in a public, expressly politicized arena. In a third section devoted to the theme of exploiting the power of the dialectical image, I turn to the question of whether an analogous anamnestic function can be attributed to the level of collective subjectivity. Indeed, Benjamin repeatedly suggests this, but it is a conceptual move that is fraught with difficulties.

**Existential implications**

As a first step towards elucidating the redemptive power of the dialectical image and the manner in which this is to have an activating effect on the remembering subject, I
propose to begin by examining the effects of Eingedenken at the level of individual subjectivity (which, needless to say, is already situated in a determinate social context, namely that of late capitalism and modernity). This relates to what might be described as the existential implications of Benjaminian remembrance or, in other words, the ability of memory to function as a vehicle of overcoming alienation. While this may be viewed as a further variation of the theme of intervening anamnestically against commodification and reification, it is now addressed explicitly in experiential terms - which brings us back to the basic premise of Chapter 3, namely that the concept of Eingedenken is conceived in response to the atrophy of experience that Benjamin has identified as a defining feature of the phenomenology of modernity.

On Benjamin's analysis the decline of experience manifests itself in a general inability to constitute Erlebnisse as Erfahrung and to integrate life and literature in the form of self-narration. Obviously an awareness of this predicament predates Benjamin, and it is noteworthy that the two main concepts of memory with which Eingedenken is being compared in the present study respond to an experiential crisis of a similar order. Thus Hegel's notion of Erinnerung is conceived precisely as a vehicle for the subject to come into its own - and thereby raise itself to a level of universal subjectivity - through a comprehensive narrative re-appropriation of the experience of spirit in a state of alienation. Proust's mémoire involontaire, similarly, allows the aspiring writer Marcel to rediscover - or discover for the first time - his own "true self" (see e.g. Proust 1981, vol III:906) and
thus to emerge from a state of self-alienation. As has been established on several occasions above, however, Benjamin rejects any options of this nature. Contra Hegel, he resists pre-defining alienation as a moment of Bildung and thus merely as a foil for a safe return to self. The Proustian model, likewise, is not a general option, in part because of its escapist implications and its disturbing tendency to remain stuck in the interiority of individual subjectivity, but in part also because from a literary point of view it is exceptional. As an “outstanding literary achievement [that] is assigned a place in the heart of the impossible,” Benjamin notes about \textit{A la recherche du temps perdu}, “this great realization of a ‘lifework’ [is going to be] the last for a long time” (GS II:311; III:201f.).

In comparison, Benjamin displays a greater affinity (at this level) with Kafka’s prose, which is likewise exceptional but which remains true to the experience of alienation by depicting a world that is radically distorted by the prevalence of shock and oblivion. Even in this context Benjamin retains something of the redemptive existential function of remembrance in his notion of Eingedenken. Following an approach that he sees prefigured by Kafka, he does this by shifting his emphasis from self-narration to a strategy of capturing a dialectical image of the self. The thought figure brought into play here is that of remembrance as an inverse prophecy: to seize an image of oneself through remembrance

\footnote{A prototype of this motif may be found in St. Augustine’s \textit{Confessions}, where remembrance in the form of self-narration serves a redemptive function in preparing the repenting subject for conversion, i.e. a return to his true nature as a creature of God.}

\footnote{This theme was already touched upon in my Kafka exposition in \textit{Chapter 3} in connection with a discussion of the figure of Odradek, humans confronting themselves in the form of insects, the little hunchback, etc. All of these Kafkaan images Benjamin interprets as prototypes of distortion, the form which things assume in a context of oblivion; cf GS II:431; III:133.}
means to identify a moment in the past which in a prophetic manner anticipates character
traits, behaviour patterns, and blind spots that have developed in the meanwhile, but which
does this in such a way as to interrupt any sense of complacency and point beyond the
present self. In the numerous scattered passages where this motif is invoked, Benjamin
usually associates it with a momentous impact, the fundamental premise being that the
ability to form an image of oneself releases agency.

To form a clear impression of what is at stake here, it will be helpful to look to
Benjamin’s prose for some specific examples of this application of Eingedenken. There are
ample examples to choose from. 174 Prophetic moments of the type described above form a
central theme in Benjamin’s autobiographical works, notably A Berlin Chronicle and
Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert. A powerful image found in the former work
(which is the more explicitly autobiographical of the two) is that of the young child walking
just a little bit behind his mother when joining her on outings to the city centre. Benjamin
portrays the latent struggle that played itself out on these walks. He recalls his dismay at his
mother’s “propensity for turning the most insignificant items of conduct into tests of my
aptitude for practical life.” But he also knew how to get back at her, and in this he detects a
prophetic moment prefiguring an ambiguous trait in himself in later life:

I remember, too, how nothing was more intolerable to my mother than the pedantic
care with which, on these walks, I always kept half a step behind her. My habit of

174 McCole accredits Peter Szondi for pointing out “the wealth of images in which
Benjamin sought out moments in his childhood that turned out to prefigure later
experiences - ‘omens and traces of his later life.’ What Benjamin listened for were ‘the first
notes of a future which has meanwhile become past’” (McCole 1993:274, paraphrasing
Szondi 1978:498f.).
seeming slower, more maladroit, more stupid than I am, had its origin in such walks, and has the great attendant danger of making me think myself quicker, more dexterous, and shrewder than I am. (GS VI:466; Refl.:4f.)

Benjamin recognizes some of the same traits in himself in a sketch from Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert called “Winter Morning.” Here his point of departure is an assurance that “[t]he fairy who grants a wish actually exists for everyone. But only a few can recall the wish they made; and thus there are few who recognize its fulfillment in their own lives” (GS V:247). However, the author counts himself among those who can recall his wish. It came to him in his childhood during the pangs of awakening. Winter mornings in his early school days, the maid would appear in his chamber at half past six to light a fire and then, once the flames had caught on, would place an apple for him in the stove pipe. This lured the child out of bed; the dancing flames and the scent of the baked apple reconciled him with the day and sometimes even gave him encouragement on his way to school. But the very moment he arrived at his cold school bench, his fatigue would return with a vengeance, and a thousand times he formulated the wish: could he only be allowed to sleep in. Later this was granted him, but it had not been a wise wish, for on account of it any hopes he might have had of position and a secure livelihood had been in vain!175

A third striking example of the motif of wish realization and inverse prophecy is found in the Kafka essay, where Benjamin takes the reader “right into the milieu of Kafka’s world” by presenting an image of personal redemption, i.e. an overcoming of alienation, in

175 Compare A Berlin Chronicle, where an earlier sketch of the same image is found (GS VI:494; Refl.:34f.). Repeatedly in Benjamin’s authorship the notion of sleeping in figures a general metaphor for missed opportunities.
an absolutely minimalist form. Few other passages convey with the same force the extent to which Benjamin retains Proust’s longing for happiness but withholds its realization:

In a Hasidic village, so the story goes, Jews were sitting together in a shabby inn one Sabbath evening. They were all local people, with the exception of one person no one knew, a very poor, ragged man who was squatting in a dark corner at the back of the room. All sorts of things were discussed, and then it was suggested that everyone should tell what wish he would make if one were granted him. One man wanted money; another wished for a son-in-law; a third dreamed of a new carpenter’s bench; and so everyone spoke in turn. After they had finished, only the beggar in his dark corner was left. Reluctantly and hesitantly he answered the question. ‘I wish I were a powerful king reigning over a big country. Then, some night while I was asleep in my palace, an enemy would invade my country, and by dawn his horsemen would penetrate my castle and meet with no resistance. Roused from my sleep, I wouldn’t have time even to dress and I would have to flee in my shirt. Rushing over hill and dale and through forests day and night, I would finally arrive safely right here at the bench in this corner. This is my wish.’ The others exchanged uncomprehending glances. ‘And what good would this wish have done you?’ someone asked. ‘I’d have a shirt,’ was the answer. (GS II:433; Ill.:135)

In assessing the significance of this type of imagery for our understanding of the practice of Eingedenken, one may readily acknowledge that they are formally or structurally indicative of the function of overcoming alienation outlined above, but it is not obvious how they are actually to be understood as either redemptive or activating. From a historical materialist point of view, they are questionable with respect to both the content and the subject of remembrance. The wry, bittersweet recognition of what appears to be merely the seeds of failure (of missed opportunities, “sleeping in” and being always already too late, etc.\(^{176}\)) hardly yields a fulfilling image of the remembering subject, and the latter remains, moreover, portrayed merely as a private individual without any obvious propensity for

\(^{176}\) This is a recurrent motif already in *One-Way Street*; see, e.g., GS IV:85, 88, 94f., 122, 131f., 139, 141f.; SW: 444, 446, 450f., 470, 476, 481, 483.
political action. Both of these objections deserve further attention, as the attempt to elaborate how they might be answered will reveal something fundamental about Eingedenken as a political force as well as about Benjamin’s manner of appropriating theological motifs.

If we compare the undramatic, deliberately anti-climactic outcome of Benjamin’s examples of what it is like to capture an image of oneself with the manner in which Hegelian memory facilitates self-recognition through a long, drawn-out process of appropriating world historical experience (the subject coming into its own by becoming for-itself what it is in-itself), the former undeniably comes across as a restrictive vision of self-realization. The minimalist character of Benjamin’s redemptive intervention is similarly conspicuous when compared with the Proustian ambition of reconstructing a life in literature. In some of the more extreme cases, such as the beggar in the inn picturing himself in a king’s shirt, his examples of what it is like to experience a flash of self-illumination verge on caricature. But in the critic’s persistent renunciation of fulfilment, it is nevertheless possible to detect a crucial point concerning the appropriation of theological tropes. For if memory is to be attributed a redemptive function, we need to inquire how we might picture redemption in the first place. Judaic orthodoxy prohibits the attempt, and in so doing it confronts the faithful with the dilemma of anticipating redemption - being oriented towards the coming of the Messiah - without ever being able to visualize and articulate in positive terms what it would be like. Benjamin staunchly embraces this tradition of imagistic and conceptual renunciation. In the same section of the Kafka essay that contains the image of the beggar in the inn, he accredits Kafka on the grounds that
"[n]o other writer has obeyed the commandment: ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image’ so faithfully” (GS II:428; III:129). In this spirit, he might confront both Hegel and Proust with the charge that any positive image they produce of utopian categories is a trivialization and falsification: Absolute knowing is a blatant breach of the iconoclastic maxim, and even the moments of a lost childhood with which Proust identifies happiness cannot be recovered except by exposing the downside of the promise they contained.

Herein lies a fundamental austerity of thought that carries over into Benjamin’s fusion of Marxism and theology.177 Be it a matter of providing a qualitative determination of the nature of the revolution, the classless society, or the liberated subject, Benjamin’s thinking is always subject to the predicament that the utopian concepts in question are indispensable for critical thought, but any definitive specification of their content involves a moment of falsification. Thus the concepts can only be stated indirectly, can only be invoked or indicated and only instantiated in such a manner that the gap between concept and instantiation is unmistakably apparent. This theme will be taken up again at the end of the chapter; at the present juncture my concern is merely to suggest that Benjamin’s dialectical self-images are true to this stipulation.

177 Compare Adorno’s personal reference in a letter dated Nov. 10, 1938 (in response to Benjamin’s first extensive Baudelaire study titled Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire), to “the ascetic discipline you allowed to rule, making it possible for you to abstain from conclusive theoretical answers to questions throughout the text” (Corr.:580). Ironically, however, it would appear that one of Adorno’s persistent objections is that Benjamin’s thinking is not ascetic enough, since his reliance on concrete images of redemption continues to bring him into conflict with his own “Bilderverbot.” In my own interpretation, this implicit contradiction marks a field of unresolved tension into which Benjamin deliberately interjects his strategic interventions.
Politicizing the private

This brings us to the second objection identified above to the alleged political effect of Benjamin's memory images, namely the objection concerning the subject of remembrance. The obvious problem here is that Benjamin's specific examples of what it is like to seize an image of oneself through Eingedenken not only seem insignificant in content but also tend to be entirely private. None of the examples examined here presents an image of the remembering self as anything remotely resembling a revolutionary subject guided by a sense of the present as "the time of the now." If the examples are nevertheless to be taken as paradigmatic of the anamnestic function of seizing an image of oneself, it therefore needs to be clarified how this practice can be attributed a broader political significance.

In turning to a closer examination of Benjamin's reintroduction of remembrance into the political arena, we must begin by noting that the difficulties encountered in this connection are not peculiar to Benjamin's thinking. Rather, his attempts to politicize the past confront an objective difficulty in the fact that memory in the modern era displays a tendency to become an inherently private function - unlike traditional memory which is supported by rituals and ceremonies, and unlike the memory of the storyteller which is by its very nature situated in communal work spaces, etc. The same is true, incidentally, of many of the religious motifs with which Benjamin associates Eingedenken. Since Weber, it has been a common observation among sociologists that religious experience in the bourgeois era, in part as a result of the process of a secularization and rationalization of public life and institutions, has largely retreated to the private sphere (see e.g. Habermas
1991:103). It is therefore in keeping with an objective historical tendency that Benjamin at several critical junctures conceptualizes Eingedenken in predominantly personal terms. But this does not mean that he condones the tendency or intends to cast his philosophy of memory as an existential philosophy. To the contrary, just as his commitment to re-fusing (Wohlfarth 1986) Marxism with elements of a theology that is capable of resisting the protestant retreat of faith and religious thinking to the private sphere, so is the practice of Eingedenken, even in its most private moments, from the outset oriented towards depositories of memory in the public realm (e.g. as contained in cityscapes and material objects) that contain a potential for exploding the self-contained interiority of bourgeois subjectivity.

Nowhere is Benjamin’s dual assessment of esoteric remembrance as both objectively founded and politically problematic made more explicit than in his final verdict on Proust’s anamnestic recovery of a lost childhood. If this is predominantly of private significance, Benjamin submits, then Proust in effect accentuates an already existing social tendency:

The deterioration of experience manifests itself in Proust in the complete realization of his ultimate intention. There is nothing more ingenious or more loyal than the way in which he nonchalantly and constantly strives to tell the reader: Redemption is my private show. (GS 1:643; Ill.:200, n15)

To Benjamin, the imagery furnished by involuntary memory is emphatically not to be viewed as a “private show.” Alongside the objection to any positive identification of redemption elaborated in the last section, it is a fundamental theme of his writing throughout the 1930s to resist the retreat of redemption into the private sphere. This is the
main thrust of the notion of *profane illumination* that he adopted from the Surrealists (and often found the latter incapable of measuring up to), and it accounts for his staunch orientation towards mass art, despite its complicity with a general trivialization of experience (and to a certain extent also with politically regressive tendencies). Herein lies one of the lasting points of controversy between Benjamin and Adorno, the latter of whom maintained in response to *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that even given the decline of auratic art, esoteric autonomous art works still have a critical role to play as a preserve for truth and an experience of freedom that has been jettisoned by mass art (letter dated March 18, 1936; Adorno 1995:168f.). Benjamin never fully gave in to this point of criticism. He insisted, in Habermas’ phrase, that “the true moments of the tradition will be rescued for the messianic future either exoterically or not at all” (Habermas 1991:104).

According to Scholem, the commitment to rid the concept of redemptive memory of its esoteric thrust places Benjamin solidly in a Judaic theological tradition. In a publication which postdates Benjamin, Scholem notes that:

> A totally different concept of redemption determines the attitude to Messianism in Judaism and Christianity ... Judaism, in all its forms and manifestations, has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community ... In contrast, Christianity conceives of redemption as an event in the spiritual and unseen realm, an event which is reflected in the soul, in the private world of each individual, and which effects an inner transformation which need not correspond to anything outside. (Scholem: *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, quoted from Buck-Morss 1989:230)

In contrast to his life-long friend, however, Benjamin maintained that exoteric redemption is a matter of openly politicizing memory. There are, generally speaking, two ways of going
about this. The first consists in somehow attributing political significance to the individual function of memory. In lieu of plausible contemporary models of collective remembrance, so it might be argued, a critical challenge consists in constituting individual memory as a political factor. The second avenue consists in attributing a capacity for Eingedenken to the collectivity as such and constituting it as a political factor at this level. This, needless to say, is more radical and more contentious than the proposal to politicize personal remembrance. But it is equally important; from a conceptual point of view, the shift to the collective level might be viewed as the final dialectical transition to complete the concept of Eingedenken, and in relation to the present study it would bring our overall exposition back full circle to the urgency of intervening politically at the level of the philosophy of history.

In fact, Benjamin pursues both avenues sketched here and we shall seek to form an overview of each in turn. To begin with the ways in which memory as an individual cognitive function can be exploited in the public arena, we may note that, appearances to the contrary, it is indeed conceivable that the moment of self-recognition that is effected by the dialectical memory image may have a galvanizing impact on the remembering subject. Benjamin generally attributes tremendous significance to the ability to form an image of oneself, and even in the mitigated form prefigured in his autobiographical works this may be attributed both a negative function of disentanglement, releasing the self from constraints of normalization, and a positive function of activating the self and guiding the present. 178 The common factor underlying this dual impact is the sense of indignation

178 Benjamin's paradigm example of this is the moment of self-recognition afforded the French revolutionaries of 1789 in the image of Ancient Rome (GS I:701, II.:261, thesis 14).
generated by confronting frustrated aspirations in the past; in other words, by the tension inherent in the dialectical image between promise and the lack of fulfilment. In the preparatory notes assembled in Konvolut N of the Passagenwerk, Benjamin makes this point with greater force than in the corresponding passages of On the Concept of History. Here he observes that:

The contemporary who reads a work of history and recognizes just how long his own overwhelming misery has been in preparation - and the demonstration of this must lie close to the historian’s heart - thereby acquires a high opinion of his own powers. A history which teaches him this kind of lesson does not inspire resignation, but instead provides him with weapons. (GS V:603; N 15,3)

To facilitate this function of anamnestic self-mobilization or “awakening,” Benjamin’s main means of interrupting the immanence and self-sufficiency of esoteric remembrance consists in directing the attention of Eingedenken outward, beyond the self and its limited circle of experience. As observed already in connection with a discussion of the etymology of the neologism Ein-gedenken, it is a characteristic feature of Benjaminian remembrance to always display a certain transitive (rather than purely reflexive) quality. The prefix “Ein” should not, in other words, be taken primarily or exclusively to denote an inwardizing movement (although Eingedenken displays aspects of this too in its initial determination as ecstatic flow) but rather a transitive “thinking into” something outside the self by which it corrects its own self-contained propensity. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in connection with Benjamin’s exploration of the link between memory and material objects. The practice of figures like the collector and the perceptive-absentminded city stroller always-already situates memory in the public realm by virtue of the references to a shared
past that any material object contains. Benjamin states this point emphatically in relation to Franz Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin*. In a passage already cited, he notes that the streets of the city lead the remembering subject down "into a past that can be all the more captivating in that it is *not only the author's own, private past*. ... The city as a mnemonic device (mnemotechnischer Behelf) of the solitary stroller calls up *more* than his childhood and youth, *more* than its own history" (GS III:194; emphasis added). By the same token, it is a defining feature of the dialectical image that it is not merely of private significance. It is only constituted as dialectical due to its ability to expose objective tensions in society, and on this account it comes to function as a critical political resource. This, in a nutshell, is what is at stake in Benjamin's abiding pursuit of fleeting memory images as made visible in a sudden moment of possibility through the unrelenting, passionate, ecstatic-sober focus on a culture of things. His underlying commitment to a liberation of the object (from its reduction to exemplar and from the drudgery of utility) reflects back on the remembering self by projecting an image of the self as obligated by wrongs in the past but precisely for that reason also restored in dignity.

This latter nexus, which may appear cryptic at first sight, becomes more readily intelligible when transposed to a remembrance of the suffering of another (or, rather, of others, since Benjamin's intellectual focus is clearly on the wrongs perpetrated against the oppressed classes as such rather than against any particular individual). This too is a crucial function of exoteric remembrance and integral to Benjamin's notion of Eingedenken as redemptive. The key claim made in *On the Concept of History* is not only that the present self gains definition and direction by reflecting itself in an image of the past - like
Robespierre picturing himself as Rome reincarnate (GS I:701; thesis 14) or like the proletariat grasping its historical mission through the remembrance of enslaved grandparents (GS I:700; thesis 12) - but also that this is a matter of obligation. Here we witness a certain fusion of morality and politics, for when Benjamin posits that past generations have a claim (Anspruch) on the weak messianic power of the present (GS I:694, Ill.:254, thesis 2), this is at one and the same time presented virtually as a universal moral law and as a politically mobilizing factor. Remembrance of suffering in the past, i.e. a remembrance that refuses to justify an otherwise unbroken tradition of repression and exploitation, is our only way of honoring this duty and therefore also of preserving personal integrity in the mitigated form allowed by Benjamin in a context of global wrong. If this is taken as a core premise of a Benjaminian "minima moralia," then its flip side is that the disconnected self, the culture of self-sufficient bourgeois individuality blind to its own continuous legacy of exclusion and dehumanization, is debased.

What we find, in summary, is that Benjamin brings the same anamnestic dynamic into play vis a vis material objects and forgotten souls. The underlying premise making this possible, as has been noted in Chapter 5, is that one mirrors the other in the same manner that the commodification of things mirrors the reification of people and social relations. To Benjamin, therefore, the material object secretly embodying a forgotten past serves as a natural allegory for the dead dead - the dead twice reified by being forgotten. Conversely, the anamnestic redemption of the object prefigures the messianic redemption of history that we can only anticipate, perhaps prepare, but not command.

Overall, this epitomizes the apocalyptic aspect of Eingedenken. We shall return to
the theme presently, but before leaving aside the question concerning Benjamin’s manner of exploiting the force of the dialectical image, it is relevant to observe that the subversive-redemptive dynamic brought into play at all levels rests on the ability of Eingedenken to constitute an object, a memory image, or a moment of history as heterogeneous. Just as the material object coming into its own in the private collection is differentiated from the mass of interchangeable commodities, so Eingedenken sets a few particularly charged images of the past apart from the dominant historical narratives and in so doing rescues decisive moments of experience that are otherwise under threat by the atrophying force that Benjamin in his Kafka essay describes as “a tempest blowing from the land of oblivion” (GS II:436; III.:138). This marks the redemptive aspect of Eingedenken, but qua heterogeneous the dialectical image also subverts the forces of social forgetting from which it was wrested. Herein lies its inherent explosive power, i.e. its power to interrupt the ideological complacency that holds even the ostensibly revolutionary classes in thrall. Benjamin’s allegorical gaze on history, precisely by virtue of its fidelity to the casualties of “progress,” is conceived as an intervention against historicism, which for its part continually diffuses potentially subversive energies by construing the given historical context as purposive, inevitable, and unchangeable. As it became increasingly clear to Benjamin during the late 1930s, this historical outlook made the social democratic opposition resign in the face of fascism, and a similar fundamental defeatism made even the Soviet communist alternative degenerate into a regime of repression, domination, and callousness that for any critical thinker who dared to admit it to himself could only be seen as yet another manifestation of barbarism that was “not of the good kind.”
Underlying the political impact that Benjamin attributes to the dialectical image is a further implicit premise that spatial, or imagistic, heterogeneity contributes to a sense of temporal heterogeneity. Herein lies a key to Benjamin’s identification of memory as a central force in the battlefield of history - in which “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (GS I:695; Ill.:255, thesis 6). The basic idea is that in the same manner that involuntary memory sets select material objects apart from the order of interchangeable things and constitutes these as gateways to a different level of experience and premonitions of a utopian concept of wealth, so does the image of a particular past that is uniquely connected with the present break any sense of time as an empty continuum and of history as inevitable progression. In this manner the act of seizing an image leads us to conceptualize the present as Jetztzeit - a “time of the now,” which by virtue of being a moment of redemption is also experienced as a moment of revolutionary possibility. By establishing a sense of connectedness with unfulfilled longings and aspirations in the past, the dialectical image elicits a sense of urgency and points to a concept of radical change, i.e. a concept of change that cannot once again be co-opted as yet another continuation of the same. This is essentially the intervention of fashion, the market’s exploitation of a longing for change, but transfigured by historical materialism and transposed from the market place to “the open air of history” (GS I:701; thesis 14). Ultimately, it is the dialectical inversion of objective social forces of domination that allows Benjamin, in defiance of any exploitation of memory as a substitute or compensation (Ersatz) for unfulfilled longings, to maintain

179 Compare the following passage in Benjamin’s Kafka essay: “No one says that the distortions that it will be the Messiah’s mission to set right someday affect only our space; surely they are distortions of our time as well” (GS II:433; Refl.:135).
Eingedenken, even in its redemptive aspect, as an activating political force.

*Eingedenken as collective remembrance?*

As anticipated at the beginning of the last section, it must be noted that the various ways of mobilizing individual remembrance as a political force do not fully account for Benjamin’s manner of casting Eingedenken as exoteric remembrance. There are many indications that he is prepared to go a step further and extend the function of memory itself to the collective level. Then things become somewhat obscure, however, for it is a strange notion that a group, class, or an entire people should be the subject of memory. Given Benjamin’s attribution of an ecstatic moment to Eingedenken, this would appear to imply idealistic notions (psychologizing the collectivity) such as a *collective unconscious* or a *collective imagination*. Yet this is precisely what Benjamin proposes. In numerous passages relating to the functions of memory, he shifts freely between the individual and the collective and even gives the impression that this is a rather seamless transition. Thus, in a draft for *On the Concept of History*, he states that “[w]hen the past coalesces in a particular moment - in a dialectical image - it enters into *the mémoire involontaire of humanity*” (GS I:1233; emphasis added). As an expression of the idea of a collective unconscious, similarly, one finds reflections in the Kafka essay (connected with the notion of “oblivion as a container”) about how “everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world” (GS II:430; Refl.:131). The phantasmagorias that form a central focus of the *Passagenwerk* are conceived as illusions of the collective imagination, and the
notion of awakening from the nineteenth century is premised on the idea of a dreaming collective. With regard to the possibility of interpreting social consciousness in psychoanalytic terms, finally, Benjamin plainly states that "[t]he condition of consciousness as a multiply entwined pattern of sleep and waking only needs to be transposed from the individual to the collective" (GS V:492; K 1.5).

Passages of this nature, of which there are many in Benjamin's late authorship, indicate that the author considered it possible to transpose the existential function of Eingedenken directly to the collective level. This would mean that a critical precondition for the revolutionary class to realize its historical mission consists in its ability to seize an image of itself as destined to act in the given moment. Nowhere does this necessity receive a more poignant expression than when Benjamin explains the failed or missing revolution and the general reactionary disposition of the proletariat simply on the grounds that "no recollection happened" (GS 1:1236). The flip side of this mournful verdict, of course, is an exceptional faith in the power of Eingedenken.

But the question remains: is this a viable explanatory model and political agenda? Can one simply transpose a concept of memory that is derived as a personal cognitive function to the collective level? Adorno did not think so. One of his most poignant points of criticism directed at Benjamin's response to the phenomenology of modernity was that any reference to notions such as a collective unconscious and a dreaming collectivity inadvertently aligned him with reactionary thinkers such as Jung and Klages.\(^\text{180}\) Even if Benjamin had no such intention (and was alert to the risk), his flirtation with categories of

\(^{180}\) This point is most strongly stated in a letter dated August 2, 1935 (Corr.:497).
collective subjectivity - a "mass ego" - brought him into an uncomfortable proximity with a certain constellation of psychologized group identity and political mass mobilization, which in the given context evoked strong associations to romantic nationalism and could only be viewed as proto-fascist. As Adorno had noted, "a dreaming collectivity is not divided into classes" and should for this reason alone be expected to obscure objective political oppositions.

A further aspect of the same disconcerting constellation was its affinity with the vitalist longing for a restoration of authentic experience that Benjamin persistently resisted but nevertheless came close to projecting. This led Adorno to request (during a personal meeting in Paris in 1936) that Benjamin should take on a critical study on Jung and Klages, both with a view to clarifying his position vis a vis the regressive moment in the work of the latter but also, in a wider sense, to squarely confront an ambiguous thrust in his own political thinking. Benjamin accepted this proposition and held onto the plan until the summer of 1937. By March of 1937 he had come so far as to assembling a reading list of the relevant works of Jung (whom he readily acknowledged not to have read earlier), and he wrote to Adorno that the more he thought about the suggestion, the more the idea was growing on him (GS V:1157). During the upcoming months, however, the project was blocked by the editors of the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung themselves, primarily on account of Horkheimer’s lack on interest in the project and his insistence (endorsed by Adorno) that Benjamin first devote himself to the Baudelaire section of the projected Passagenwerk. Due to Benjamin’s premature death the Klages and Jung study was therefore never written. The closest one comes to a response to Adorno’s concerns about
the ambiguity of any categories of collective subjectivity are found in a passing remark in
the revised Baudelaire study of 1939 to the effect that the tradition begun by Klages
culminated in the work of Jung and that both authors ended up making common cause with
fascism (GS I:608; Ill.:156). In saying this, Benjamin for the first time decisively
denounced the strong influence which Klages had exercised on his thinking and openly
acknowledged the inherent danger of cutting too close to this intellectual current (cf.

It may be, in the end, that this is where things stand with Benjamin's politics of
memory. Perhaps he has no ready answer to the legitimate concerns one might have about
the mythologization of group identity that all but inevitably follows from attributing a vital
role to memory at the level of mass psychology. Does this force us to acknowledge that the
final transition in our elaboration of Benjamin's concept of Eingedenken stands as one of
the weakest moments of the entire exposition? Perhaps it does. But as established at the
outset of the previous section, we must then also acknowledge that what we are confronted
with is an objective difficulty which is not resolved by being left unattended. Not to attempt
the conceptualization of remembrance as a public function is, within the context in which
Benjamin approaches the issue, equally as problematic as presenting the transition from
individual to collective subjectivity as seamless. What is at stake for Benjamin in
transposing the existential function of memory to a collective level is the ability to picture
the masses as a progressive political entity, i.e. to conceptualize - or form an image of - the
collectivity that could seize hold of the dream that the nineteenth century had in store for
humanity. Although cast in entirely different terms, this constitutes a renewed attempt at
addressing the problem posed by Lukács in the early 1920s concerning the articulation of a viable nexus between history and class consciousness. By the late 1930s, when Benjamin was articulating his concept of Eingedenken, this problem had not diminished in urgency but the terms of its realization had become considerably more ambiguous due to the massive defection of the working classes to fascism.

Refusing reconciliation

In conclusion of my elaboration of the third and final moment of Eingedenken, I propose one last time to take a step back and gauge some of the overall features of Benjamin's intervention in the philosophy of memory. In so doing, my immediate concern is to return to the question posed at the beginning of Chapter 4: what kind of memory is Eingedenken? This inevitably involves a further investigation of the theological dimension of Benjamin's thinking. What emerges at the present juncture is the decisive role played by the negative moment of Eingedenken and, closely related to this, the negative thrust of the theological motifs embraced by Benjamin. While this has formed an important subtheme at every level of conceptual development so far, it is consistent with Benjamin's idiosyncratic notion of dialectics that the negative moment should only become fully exposed in the final phase of conceptualization.
Summarizing the overall theme of this chapter, I have suggested that the culmination of Benjamin’s dynamic concept of memory - the moment where the ecstatic flow of remembrance comes to a halt in a poignant, existentially and politically charged image of the past - is captured in the notion of *Eingedenken as apocalyptic*. This is to be understood in a dual sense, i.e. both in the sense of Benjaminian remembrance functioning as a vehicle of judgement and in the sense that it prefigures a radical socio-temporal transition. Both aspects will in the following be developed in direct contrast to the corresponding moments of the Hegelian philosophy of memory, namely the way in which Er-innerung facilitates a reconciliation with history and thereby also a consolidation of the socio-temporal structures governing the present. The profound differences that emerge here between Benjamin’s and Hegel’s concepts of memory is mirrored by an equally profound opposition at the level of the philosophy of history, and in bringing this out, our presentation returns full circle to the questions left at the end of *Chapter 1*, where the relationship between historiography and the politics of memory was initially addressed.

For bearings on an overall characterization of Eingedenken, I find it instructive to revisit Benjamin’s Kafka exegesis, which we have seen presents two contrasting models of remembrance. What is interesting about this is that it is not yet another variation of the opposition between voluntary and involuntary memory but rather two models of redemptive remembrance and thus two possible paradigms for how to understand Eingedenken. These are divine and secular remembrance: a remembrance that reopens the books of history, sets things straight, and makes whole what had been shattered, and a remembrance that keeps faith with suffering by anticipating such a rectification of past wrongs. In drawing this
distinction, Benjamin in effect extends the prohibition against making a graven image that we have encountered as a defining feature of his "implicit theology" to the concept of memory itself. God's remembrance, we are given to understand, is truly redemptive; yet this is only a general determination, like other divine predicates it is a trait that we cannot identify in positive terms. Human memory approximates this quality; it preserves an orientation towards redemption without effecting it.

Thus, to paraphrase On the Concept of History, Eingedenken retains a redemptive structure but only in the form of a weak messianic power (GS I:694; III.:254, thesis 2). This can be further qualified, for as a counterpart to the distinction between divine and human memory we have found that Benjamin also operates with a reduplication of forgetting such that the primary forgetting which points to divine remembrance on the Day of Judgement (cf. the secret temporal index by which the past is referred to redemption; ibid.) is furthermore forgetful of itself (GS II:429; III.:131). In forgetting, we tend to become oblivious of the very fact that there is something we have forgotten. This latter level of forgetting is the domain of human intervention proper and can be addressed without breaching the injunction against creating false idols. As an exercise of the weak messianic power with which we have been endowed and to which the past has a claim, Eingedenken must as a minimum requirement be a remembrance of forgetting. Even if it is not yet equipped to set things right, it must recognize distortion - "the form which things assume in oblivion" (GS II:431; III.:133) - for what it is.¹⁸¹ The same gaze that recognizes documents

¹⁸¹ It may be noted in passing that this strategy displays a somewhat surprising affinity with the current of contemporary critical thinking that if often associated with a politics of identity. Like Benjamin's politics of remembrance, this is centred around a
of civilization also as documents of barbarism (GS I:696; III.:256, thesis 7) retains an image of suffering in the past, and in so doing “fans the spark of hope in the past” (GS I:695; III.:255, thesis 6). It preserves an orientation towards redemption (GS II:434; III.:136) by refusing to coopt the possibility through a premature identification of the actual as the ideal. This, I submit, is the fundamental thought figure that Benjamin brings into play when mobilizing Eingedenken as a redemptive force. Minimalist though it may seem, the self-image that ensues breaks the spell of the satiated subject being locked into an endless, purposeless continuation of the same.182

In the famous allegorical image of the angel of history in thesis 9 of On the Concept of History, Benjamin depicts a closely related stance vis a vis the past. Klee’s angel, Benjamin imagines, sees history not as a “chain of events” but as the unfolding of “a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” The angel “would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” but his wings are caught in the storm called progress (GS I:697f.; III.:257f.; thesis 9). He therefore has to renounce his restorational intentions and merely stares. In the Kafka essay dialectic of victimization and agency where the claim to recognition of wrongs in the past is somehow seen as empowering. Even the moment of self-recognition in an image of maimed subjectivity is viewed as a step towards transcending victimization and liberating agency.

182 Interestingly, Wohlfarth’s identifies the theme of a double forgetting, or rather the resolve to resist it, as virtually constitutive of a dominant branch of Western Marxism. In his rich exegetical study On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin, he associates the theme of “a self-perpetuating forgetting” with the biblical trope of the Fall, and further links this with the analytical concerns of Marxists in the tradition of Lukacs’ History and Class-Consciousness by interpreting it as a “double reification.” “What emerges from this reinterpretation of Genesis,” Wohlfarth remarks, “is, among other things, the prehistory of one strain of Western Marxism” (Wohlfarth 1989:165).
related imagery occurs in the passage invoking a tempest “that blows from the land of oblivion” (GS II:436; III:138). If we take this to be much the same storm that propels Klee’s angel backwards into the future, then his troubled gaze must not be understood as merely passive; rather, by bearing witness, it marks an uncompromising stance against the forces of forgetting. This is exactly how we are given to think of Eingedenken; while not privy to the comprehensive perspective on the past open to the angel of history, it nevertheless allows us in sudden glimpses - either spontaneous or constructed\textsuperscript{183} - to contemplate things from the perspective of redemption.

In the closing aphorism of his ‘reflections from a damaged life,’ the *Minima Moralia*, Adorno identifies the attainment of this perspective - which is both catastrophic and inherently paradoxical - as the aim and proper domain of philosophy. Like Benjamin, he brackets the question concerning the actual attainment of redemption:

> The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the

\textsuperscript{183} Compare Wohlfarth on the notion of the *Denkbild*, which “is both ‘an image from involuntary memory ... which suddenly appears in a moment of danger’ (GS I:1243) and a construct ‘designed on the drawing board’ (GS II:216)” (Wohlfarth 1994:179). According to Pensky, the duality of Eingedenken as both spontaneous and constructed in reality bears testimony to a shift in Benjamin’s conception of the *Passagenwerk* from a “dialectical fairy-scene” to a sociological project, from decipherment to a methodology of construction. “And construction - that is, the active intervention of the critical subject, the mastery of fragments of experience and the creative imposition of new forms upon them - would go on to bedevil the theoretical developments of the Passagenwerk from the mid-1930s until the end of Benjamin’s life. The great theoretical struggles (with Adorno / with himself) over the status of the dialectical image can rightly be said to centre around just this question: whether it is the momentary, shocking springing forth of an image of historical truth from the fragments, or whether it is a constructive achievement of the materialist historian that most adequately captures the status of the dialectical image. ... [These are] difficulties that Benjamin recognized but was never able to resolve completely” (Pensky 1996:188f.).
attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indignant and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. ... Even its own impossibility it [philosophy] must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption hardly matters. (Adorno 1986:333f., Minima Moralia, Zum Ende)

In general, Adorno was highly receptive to the characteristic pattern of a "radical negative theology" (cf. Buck-Morss 1989:244) that guides Benjamin’s thinking on memory and history. Throughout most of the 1930s, the question concerning the legitimacy of employing theological categories - within a secular paradigm - in response to past wrongs had intensely preoccupied the key figures associated with the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung. This is evident not least in their personal communication. Horkheimer seems to have adopted the most unyielding position in favour of an unmixed secularism on the grounds that the wrongs of the past are definitive and irreversible. In this, he remains loyal to the standard Marxist critique of religion as a pacifying illusion:

What has happened to the people who have perished, no future will repair. They will never be awoken in order to be eternally blessed. Nature and society have done their work, and the imagination of a Last Judgement, into which the infinite longing of the oppressed and the dying has poured, is merely a residue of primitive thinking seeking to anthropomorphize the universe in denial of the insignificant role of humans in natural history. (Horkheimer 1934; quoted after Taubald 2000:87, my translation)

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184 My exposition in the following is strongly informed by an unpublished dissertation by Benjamin Taubald, Anamnetische Vernunft. Untersuchungen zu einem Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie, University of Vienna, 2000.
In a letter to Benjamin dated March 16, 1937, Horkheimer reiterates this position:

"The assertion of incompleteness [Unabgeschlossenheit] is idealistic if completeness [Abgeschlossenheit] is not included in it. Past injustice has occurred and is complete [abgeschlossen]. The murdered are really murdered. ... If one takes incompleteness seriously, one has to believe in the Last Judgement. ... Perhaps there is a difference with regard to incompleteness between the positive and the negative, such that only injustice, terror, and the pain of the past are irreparable. Justice applied, joy, work, relate differently to time, because their positive character is largely negated by transience. This is primarily true of individual existence, in which sadness rather than happiness is sealed by death" (GS V:588f., N 7a,8).

While agreeing with Horkheimer’s dismissive assessment of the compensatory and pacifying function of positive religious faith, Adorno nevertheless saw the rejection of the modicum of hope that is retained through a defiant orientation towards a horizon of redemption as too much of a concession to the forces of oppression. He repeatedly voices the concern that the hardness required to pronounce the longings for justice on the part of the oppressed a mere illusion is itself disturbingly similar to the cynical unsentimentality that is constitutive of instrumental reason (Adorno 1975 [1966]:355f; 1992:363). In this light, the perspective of redemption is indispensable since it marks the only source of “hope against reality” (Taubald 2000:88), the only source of resistance in a context of global wrong. What is decisive for Adorno is the thought that the preservation of hope is not fundamentally a matter of offering facile comfort or in any way affirming past injustices, much less of allowing the living to close in on themselves in complacent self-sufficiency

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185 This was already cited in Chapter 1 along with a remark drafted by Benjamin in response, both of which were included in Konvolut N of the Passagenwerk.

186 This is also a primary theme of Dialectic of Enlightenment; see, e.g., Adorno & Horkheimer 1969:3, et passim.
(the constant thrust of bourgeois interiority). Rather, it is to be thought of as an emphatic gesture of reaching beyond the self in recognition of the suffering of another. The quintessential expression of this attitude - which Adorno views as a basic feature of Jewish theology - is found in Benjamin's concluding observation in the essay on Goethe's Elective Affinities, where it is premised that "only for the sake of the hopeless are we given hope" ("Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben," GS I:201).

To Adorno, the gesture of reaching out to the suffering of others not only counts as a moral imperative but is constitutive of morality as such - to the extent that a doctrine of correct living (richtiges Leben) is still meaningful in a contemporary context. After Auschwitz, the preservation of hope on behalf of the victims, and the concomitant obligation never to allow similar crimes to happen again, is a moral necessity for the survivors to go on living - as Adorno phrases it, "to even draw a breath of air." In virtue

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188 12 years later, Benjamin finds occasion to articulate a variation of the same theme by citing a passage in Kafka to the effect that there is "plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope - but not for us" (GS II:414; III.II:116).

189 "Hope in a state of despair, in which alone I see an aspect of religion that is more than a mere taking cover, is not primarily a matter of concern for one's own self but much rather that the death and irreversible loss of the loved ones - or the death and loss of those who were done wrong - are incomprehensible to us, and even today I am often at a loss to comprehend how one is able to draw a breath of air without hope for the diseased" (letter to Horkheimer January 25, 1937; quoted after Taubald 2000:91, my translation). Compare the classical passage in which Adorno rearticulates the Kantian categorical imperative: "A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so
of being the primary faculty which confronts us with past wrongs and thereby orients us
towards the suffering of others, Eingedenken is pivotal to this moral imperative.\(^\text{190}\) This
observation lies at the heart of Benjamin’s response to Horkheimer’s strong insistence,
cited above, upon the definitiveness of past wrongs. He grants that past crimes are
unalterable from the point of view of history as science, but maintains that “[t]he corrective
to this line of thought lies in the reflection that history is not just a science but a form of
Eingedenken as well. What the science has ‘established,’ Eingedenken can modify.
Eingedenken can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete and the
complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in Eingedenken we
have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally a-theological,
just as we are not allowed to try to write it in immediately theological concepts” (GS
V:589, N 8,1).

Despite Benjamin’s self-imposed ban on providing a positive qualification of the
theological motifs guiding his thinking,\(^\text{191}\) Benjamin commentators have since the

\(^{190}\) Compare Adorno and Horkheimer’s own use of the notion Eingedenken in

\(^{191}\) A graphic expression of this ban is found in entry N 7a,7 of the Passagenwerk
(previously cited), where Benjamin suggests that his “thinking relates to theology as the
blotter to the ink. It is soaked with it. If it were up to the blotting paper, [however,] nothing
of what is written would remain” (V588, N 7a, 7). Adorno shares the commitment to a
radical conceptual constraint as a precondition for working with the categories of a negative
publication of the *Passagenwerk* been paying increasing attention to the specific elements of theology informing his unorthodox concept of materialism. The predominant line of interpretation is that the aspiring Marxist literary critic was profoundly influenced, not only by Jewish theology generally but specifically by the Kabbalist tradition as conveyed to him first and foremost by Scholem (but also through the reading of other current works such as Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*). Central to this theology is the concept of *Tikkun,*

... theology. In a letter to Benjamin of May 4, 1938, he hints at this mutual understanding by endorsing Benjamin’s undertaking “to mobilize the force of theological experience anonymously in a profane setting” (quoted from Taubald 2000:89, my translation, emphasis added). Similarly, in the letter addressed to Horkheimer on January 25, 1937, Adorno concludes his motivation for invoking theological categories by acknowledging that “I am aware, needless to say, that for very long, perhaps for our entire lifetime, it will be necessary to remain silent about this” (quoted from Taubald 2000:92, my translation).

Indeed, this influence may have been deeper than Benjamin himself was ever able to recognize, and perhaps even more profound than proclaimed by Scholem in his effort to claim his friend for the Judaic intellectual tradition. For generally the Kabbalist scholar was blind to the extent to which theological motifs recur within Benjamin’s overtly materialist thinking (Buck-Morss 1989:232). In the early attempts at a non-partisan reading of Benjamin - i.e. a reading that avoids pegging Benjamin either as a somewhat unconventional Marxist or as a mystically inclined intellectual in the Jewish tradition - the parallelism and close affinity between theological and materialist motifs is registered but not developed in detail. This is the case in the two seminal papers by Habermas and Tiedemann reviewed in Chapter 1 but also, surprisingly, in the 1986 study by Irving Wohlfarth evocatively entitled *Re-fusing Theology.* Although explicitly devoted to developing a new perspective on Benjamin’s allegedly impossible fusion of theology and historical materialism, Wohlfarth does not actually elaborate on the specificity of Jewish theological legacy to which Benjamin “found himself intermittently reverting” (Wohlfarth 1986:12). This shortcoming is soon corrected, however, and Wohlfarth's 1989 study *On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin* still stands as one of the most insightful and rich explorations of the subject. Other significant examinations of the Kabbalist subtext to Benjamin’s secular thinking include Wolin’s *The Aesthetic of Redemption* and, notably, the philosophy chapter of Buck-Morss’ *The Dialectics of Seeing.* (An important German work on the subject is Stéphane Mosès’ *Der Engel der Geschichte. Franz Rosenzweig - Walter Benjamin - Gershom Scholem* (1994). However, I refrain from citing the study for the simple reason my attention has only been drawn to it at a very late point in the writing process.)
which Buck-Morss explains by paraphrasing the Kabbalist scholar Isaac Luria to the following effect:

[T]he breaking of the ‘vessels’ of God’s attributes scattered divine sparks throughout the material world. The task of healing these broken vessels, an enterprise in which ‘man and God are partners,’ reestablishes ‘the harmonious condition of the world’ not as a restoration, but ‘as something new.’ (Buck-Morss 1989:235)

A crucial part of man’s work in “ ushering in” the Messianic age consists in interpreting the material world - “nature,” “reality” - for signs of a messianic condition (ibid.:240). Theology “reads” nature in the same manner as philological hermeneutics reads texts, namely with a view to detecting the divine sparks in it as premonitions of a redeemed future. What is of particular importance in our present context is that the same redemptive hermeneutic is also directed towards the past; this means that the object of remembrance too may be identified as the divine sparks - “sparks of hope in the past” - that become visible to the remembering subject in a sudden moment of knowability.

It must be noted that this theory, while cast in mystic terms, is fully consistent with the general role assigned to remembrance (Zakhor) in the Jewish tradition, where every generation is under a radical obligation to remember for the sake of the redemption of the dead (cf. Yerushalmi 1982:5ff.) Also Benjamin’s trope of forging significant constellations between past and present has a close parallel in Kabbalist thinking in so far as the objective here, as indicated by Luria, is not to grasp the past “the way it really was,” but rather as “something new.” Only in conjunction with events and insights pertaining to the present do
the elements of tradition become fully intelligible - much as the rescued image of the past moment or object to Benjamin includes elements of its "afterlife." Buck-Morss notes that this premise accounts for an in-built proclivity towards heresy among Kabbalist thinkers, for while the latter are intensely preoccupied with tradition, it is invariably with a view to transforming it beyond recognition - the paradigm example being the conversion of the 17th century mystic Sabbatai Zevi to Islam in order to "lift up the holy sparks which were dispersed even among the gentiles" (Scholem, cited after Buck-Morss 1989:237).

According to Buck-Morss, it was possible for Benjamin to remain so close to the Judaic, and notably the Kabbalist theological legacy without announcing this openly because the latter readily lent itself to profane appropriation on account of an already pronounced element of materialism (Buck-Morss 1989:233, 239f.). And viewed from the opposite angle, it might be argued that Benjamin's own "conversion" to materialism was consistent with the heretical thrust of Kabalism and the premise that theological motifs only become fully intelligible by being informed by concrete historical references.

Arguably, historical materialism supplied this. The notion of the Fall thus lends itself to being deciphered as the alienation from nature inherent in the social relations surrounding commodity production. "Satanic qualities of death and eternal recurrence coalesce around

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193 Herein lies the ultimate significance of the "tremendous shattering of tradition" registered by Benjamin. From a Kabbalistic point of view, it is an inherently ambiguous phenomenon, for while it presents the unique possibility of accomplishing new interpretations, it also entails the risk of an absolute loss of semantic potential - hence the continuous urgency of rescuing every messianic image in the past that momentarily presents itself (cf. Buck-Morss 1989:233).

194 Scholem, however, was never prepared to grant Benjamin this concession; cf. Buck-Morss 1989:237.
th[e] commodity world of fashion" (ibid.:239). And the “divine sparks” invoked by
Kabbalist scholars can now be interpreted concretely as utopian potential - i.e. signs of a
socialist future (ibid.:240).

Without pushing analogies of this nature any further, it might be argued that the
detailed exposition of the theological sources shaping Benjamin’s political thinking in
effect presents an answer to Tiedemann’s question posed in the 1975 essay on the
historiographical theses about why Benjamin had to translate already theologically
informed materialist concepts “back” into theological language - i.e. to a limited degree
make theology “visible again” (Tiedemann 1983-84:83f.). The rather obvious response
which Tiedemann does not seem to give due attention is that Benjamin is infusing his
political philosophy with elements of a radically different theology than could meaningfully
be gleaned from the Enlightenment philosophy and Marxist theory which Tiedemann
claims had already subsumed the core content of theology. The conceptual departure is
noticeable at every level. In On the Concept of History, Benjamin emphasizes it expressly
with reference to the understanding of temporality, but the insistence upon alternative
theological roots also guides his identification of the past as a site of intervention and in a
wider sense the uncompromising stance he adopts towards the manner in which every
present exploits and betrays the past. Ultimately the significance of theology to Benjamin is
less a matter of doctrine or content (something that could conceivably be secularized) than
of gaining access to a perspective and cognitive mode which critical theory cannot do
without.

Fundamentally, Benjamin’s political philosophy is structured around a
remembrance that *refuses reconciliation* with wrongs in the past. The centre of gravity of his thinking in this connection is the attribution of an apocalyptic moment to the concept of memory.\textsuperscript{195} This epitomizes what I have described as the third moment of Eingedenken. Etymologically, the notion of the apocalypse indicates an *uncovering*. We may also picture it as a *resurfacing of* a suppressed past - a past which has disappeared from view and has become dormant but which is not erased from the memory of God. In a comment on the practice of chroniclers who do not distinguish between significant and insignificant events, Benjamin stipulates that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (GS I:694; thesis 3). This marks the perspective of theology by which the end of the old order of things is envisioned as the day when the books of memory (or history) will be re-opened and the past for the first time becomes citable in all its moments (GS I:694; Ill.:254, thesis 3). Thus the apocalypse is the quintessential moment of recognition; it is pictured as a cosmic or historical re-awakening, a shock to redress all shocks.

First and foremost the apocalypse is the Day of Judgement (cf. Wohlfarth 1978:186f.). In a suggestive passage of the Kafka essay, Benjamin cites a character from *The Castle* posing the question “can an individual official forgive?” Kafka’s response is that “[t]his could only be a matter for the over-all authorities, but even they can probably *not forgive but only judge*” (GS II:426; Ill.:128; emphasis added). In his commentary, Benjamin notes that from the vantage point of Christian theology, such a stern verdict is liable to be viewed as symptomatic of “the wretched state of a man who does not know

Christ" (ibid.). But he quickly brushes this type of rationalization aside as a "blind alley" and a telling indication of how easy it is to misconstrue Kafka. To Benjamin, the critical point is that "in the mirror which the prehistoric world held before him in the form of guilt [Kafka] ... saw the future emerging in the form of judgement" (ibid.). By associating this with the notion of a Last Judgement, Benjamin reinforces the apocalyptic orientation of Eingedenken.

In order to appreciate the full significance of Benjamin's emphasis on judgement rather than reconciliation, it is necessary to recall once more how deeply entrenched a function of memory it is to facilitate reconciliation. The paradigmatic example is the Hegelian dialectic, which in every respect is about reconciling opposites. Indeed, if the various moments of the concept of Eingedenken come together in its determination as a vehicle of judgement, then Erinnerung in Hegel's thinking serves as the essential vehicle of reconciliation. In the introduction and then again the concluding paragraph of the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel is explicit in attributing the function of a theodicy to the dialectical appropriation of the past.196 Faced with the question of how God could allow so

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196 In the opening pages of *The Philosophy of History*, in connection with Hegel's initial elaboration of his notion of "philosophical history," on reads:

"The time must eventually come for understanding that rich product of active Reason, which the History of the World offers to us. ... Our intellectual striving aims at realizing the conviction that what was intended by eternal wisdom, is actually accomplished in the domain of existent, active Spirit, as well as in that of mere Nature. Our mode of treating the subject is in this aspect, a Theodicea - a justification of the ways of God - which Leibniz attempted metaphysically, in his method, i.e., indefinite abstract categories - so that the ill that is found in the world may be comprehended, and the thinking Spirit reconciled with the fact of the existence of evil. Indeed, nowhere is such a harmonizing view more pressingly demanded than in Universal History ... " (Hegel 1956 [1822-23 / 1830-31]:15).
much suffering in the world, how God could be good when his creation is bad and innocent creatures suffer, speculative history has a ready answer. After the fact, when viewed in retrospect, events that seemed devoid of (divine) purpose, and thus purely evil, can be seen to actually have been meaningful. Even in the most irrational moments of history, reason was - cunningly - operative behind the scenes. This dynamic of rationalization extends to the concept of Erinnerung as well. Once difficult memories have been fully processed in a Hegelian fashion, we arrive at the realization that things had to be like this, or at least that the dark moments of history served a purpose. In this manner we reconcile ourselves with the past, and to Hegel the ability to accomplish this is intimately linked with the remembering subject’s ability to actualize agency in the present. Phrased differently, it may be stated that Erinnerung - in stark contrast to Eingedenken - is conceived by Hegel as a faculty of forgiveness. This is made clear in the transition from chapter 7 to chapter 8 of the Phenomenology of Spirit, for what is at stake here is the secular conceptualization of the content of revealed religion (Christianity), and in this motion Erinnerung, the final

Mirroring the manner in which a discussion of the notion of Erinnerung frames the Phenomenology of Spirit, the study concludes on a similar note:

“Philosophy concerns itself only with the glory of the Idea mirroring itself in the History of the World. Philosophy escapes from the weary strife of passions that agitate the surface of society into the calm region of contemplation; that which interests it is the recognition of the process of development which the idea has passed through in realizing itself - i.e. the Idea of Freedom, whose reality is the consciousness of Freedom and nothing short of it. ... That the History of the World, with all the changing scenes which its annals present, is this process of development and the realization of Spirit - this is the true Theodicea, the justification of God in History. Only this insight can reconcile Spirit with the History of the World - viz., that what has happened, and is happening every day, is not only ‘without God,’ but is essentially His Work” (Hegel 1956 [1822-23 / 1830-31]:457).
determination of Spirit in chapter 8, sublates the role of forgiveness in chapter 7. Thus, the inbuilt thrust of Erinnerung is radically affirmative.

This basic trope - which is what Horkheimer so vehemently objected to by abandoning theological motifs altogether and Adorno and Benjamin by associating memory with a purely negative theology - is ubiquitous in patterns of rationalizing past wrongs for the sake of a better future. To be sure, such processes of anamnestic reconciliation generally happen without the comprehensive teleology of a Hegelian philosophy of history, but they nevertheless bring into play a remembrance that comes to terms with a difficult past by rendering it meaningful in light of subsequent developments. While operative in countless ways at the individual level, the dynamic is most pronounced at the collective, national level. The paradigm example from recent history is the manner in which the world today is heir to a settling of accounts with the wrongs of World War II in the Nuremberg trials. Not only did these serve as an occasion to uncover and condemn the crimes perpetrated by fascism; in so doing, the trials also ceremonially instituted a new world order - in effect a pax Americana but ostensibly and ideally a world-wide rule of law and peaceful international relations epitomized by the proclamation of human rights and the founding of the United Nations. Without the global confrontation with total disaster, would we have had this? After the fall of apartheid, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission - which by its very name invokes the project of linking up remembrance and reconciliation - has set itself to accomplish a similar transition to a new social and moral order through the painful process of confronting and coming to terms with the crimes perpetrated under white racist rule. To invoke a third unsettling example, it is impossible to ignore the symbolic and
political implications of the manner in which the Holocaust Remembrance Day, Yom HaShoah, was scheduled by the Knesset to occur in direct conjunction with (i.e. eight days prior to) the national holiday celebrating the founding of the state of Israel, Yom HaAtzma'ut. In this manner the two events are associatively if not causally connected, and it is but a short step to draw the conclusion that the former tragedy is somehow compensated - and rendered meaningful - by the latter political development.\footnote{For a more detailed discussion of this question, also recognizing the deliberate intention of associating the newly founded state of Israel with the ethos of the Jewish resistance movements during the war, see J. E. Young 1993:210ff.}

Obviously none of these ritualized, symbolic transitions to a new social and moral order is intended as a justification of past wrongs. To the contrary, remembrance is invariably conceived as a gesture towards the victims and as a radical break with an unjust past, but when does the link between processing historical experiences and projecting a sense of present and future purpose become so strong that we imperceptibly begin to allow that the wrongs perpetrated, and the suffering of the victims, may have been a regrettable necessary detour on the road to a better future? In accordance with the maxim that the image of enslaved grandparents must never be eclipsed by an image of well-nourished grandchildren (thesis 12), Benjamin is vigilantly on guard against (intended or unintended) rationalizations of this nature in all of his writings on memory.

Stated in general terms, the disturbing truth is that all forms of anamnestic reconciliation - be this the result of a memory effecting a closing of history, constituting the past effectively as past, or a memory legitimizing the present through its reconstruction of the past - invariably involves a moment of infidelity. There is, in other words, an element of
betrayal built into the very structure of neutralizing memory. This latent dynamic is nowhere more pronounced than in Freud’s notion of a work of mourning (if we are to once again allow a leap between individual and collective memory) which, ultimately, is intended to liberate the bereaved from his or her former attachment. While seeking to heal, to maintain or restore continuity, remembrance is also a way of freeing ourselves from the past, just as the work of mourning is the psyche’s necessary preparation to attach libido to another. It is in this respect a concession to the reality-principle - “the life-affirming tendency which would ... ‘overcome’ loss by moving on” (Comay 1993:107). Benjamin’s thinking does not permit this. The notion of a “mourning play” that he develops in his work on the Baroque drama actually bears closer resemblance to the “pathological” counterpart to Freudian mourning, namely the state of melancholia in which the bereaved subject refuses to reconcile itself with loss. The same pattern carries over into the notion of Eingedenken, and a quick overview of the cluster of themes associated with this reveals what Comay has aptly called “an almost clinical picture of Freudian melancholia” (ibid.:109; compare Pensky 1993:151f.). The operative dynamic at work here is the force of a past that cannot be re-membered in the sense of being essentialized, interiorized, and operationalized for a self-sufficient present. This is the “immemorial” past of Benjaminian...

198 In his Memoires for Paul de Man, Derrida displays a painful awareness of the inherent ambiguity of this dynamic of an “impossible mourning” (Derrida 1986:3 et passim) and an inherent infidelity of remembrance: “What do we mean by ‘in memory of’ or, as we also say, ‘to the memory of’? For example, we reaffirm our fidelity to the departed friend by acting in a certain manner in memory of him, or by dedicating a speech to his memory. Each time, we know our friend to be gone forever, irremediably absent, annulled to the point of knowing or receiving nothing himself of what takes place in his memory. In this terrifying lucidity, in the light of this incinerating blaze, we remain in disbelief ...” (Derrida 1986:21).
Eingedenken, the experience of excess (i.e. shock) that can neither be articulated in propositional language nor adequately captured by voluntary recollection. With only a "slight modification" of the Freudian diagnosis of pathological mourning, the continued impact of such a past may be understood to disrupt autonomous subjectivity and at the same time confront the living with a radical obligation towards the dead. So Comay: "Buried alive within the interior fortress of a subjectivity fractured by the persistence of what cannot be discharged, absorbed, or otherwise metabolized, the lost object asserts its continued claim on those still alive. Melancholia articulates this claim" (ibid.).

Behind Benjamin's radically pessimistic view of the healing powers of memory lies an objective analysis of the possibilities of intervention and the scope of human agency allowed by contemporary society. This accounts for one of the most fundamental differences between Benjaminian and Hegelian thinking in the area of politics and memory and, more broadly, at the level of the philosophy of history. In essence, the Hegelian commitment to a mediation between subjective and objective spirit builds on a faith in history as the medium of liberation or, expressed differently, the sphere of the realization of freedom. This, indeed, is the central theme of the Philosophy of History, and in the final pages of this work Hegel is able to conclude that "the History of the World is nothing but the development of the Idea of Freedom" (Hegel 1956:456). The same basic motif, which in Hegel's presentation is inextricably linked with the frank identification of historiography as theodicy, is retained by the Marxist tradition in virtually all of its otherwise conflicting manifestations. Benjamin, however, views universal history not as a context of liberation but as one of oppression and looming disaster, which in and of itself is to be understood
historically. In late capitalism (the political impasse of the 1930s), the social order has become massive and seemingly unchangeable, technology has largely become an instrument of domination rather than liberation, and within the political landscape there are no oppositional forces in sight that are sufficiently radical and organized to support a revolutionary commitment along the lines of the standard Marxist agenda. Thus the context for a strategy of ideology critique, as still upheld by an independent Marxist such as Marcuse (invoked by Habermas in his Benjamin review) as well as by parts of the Marxist tradition affiliated with the Second and Third International, has in Benjamin’s analysis effectively been undermined at virtually every level. This is not only a function of the Stalinist betrayal of the revolutionary cause. In keeping with a key thought figure employed by Tiedemann, it would rather be appropriate to speak of an “objective degeneration” of the theory - practice nexus (Tiedemann 1983-84:97), and in this light it might be suggested that Benjamin more rigorously than any of his Marxist contemporaries insists on a principle of historical specificity according to which a level assessment of the revolutionary potential of the present forms an indispensable precondition for the conceptualization of a viable notion of practice.

In pointed contrast to the impenetrability of the present historical situation, Benjamin defines the past as a site of retroactive intervention. Precisely in a situation where history presents itself as a context of mounting disaster and at the same time a context of unalterable fate, it is vital for Benjamin to insist (contra Horkheimer) that this seemingly sealed nexus of past and present is not a fait accompli, i.e. that there are moments of incompletion in the past which beckon us to respond not only with empathy but also with
indignation. Such moments of unreconciled suffering trace a horizon of judgement, which in turn points to a different future. To invoke such a doctrine of incompleteness means embracing a certain dimension of theology, and to Benjamin this means articulating a radicalized concept of memory.

There is from the point of view of a negative theology a remarkable consistency in Benjamin’s conceptualization of Eingedenken. As a mode of remembrance directed towards a past which cannot be essentialized and rendered meaningful in a scheme of historicist progress, Eingedenken marks the place of redemption, but only as a limit category. Thus, both the object and the effect of Eingedenken is restricted to negative articulation, i.e. is subject to the iconoclastic ban (Bilderverbot) that is everywhere imposed on theological categories in Benjamin’s usage. Being directed at an amorphous, unspeakable object, Eingedenken mobilizes the very modes of ecstatic subjectivity which are the fallout of a present haunted by an unreconciled past. This, ultimately, is why Benjamin’s philosophy of memory is cast as a response to the phenomenology of modernity - in other words, in response to the prevailing impoverishment of experience which Benjamin resolutely embraces and thereby subverts. In gradually tracing the contours of a politics of Eingedenken, I have presented this pattern of immanent critique as a radical expression of the strategy of mimetic intervention that governs Benjamin’s thinking at every level. By remaining relentlessly committed to the redemption of trivialized objects and forgotten, reified souls, his anamnestic intervention at one and the same time casts a glaring light on the barren landscape of petrified history and vaguely prefigures the eschatological moment
of transubstantiation,\textsuperscript{199} which in materialist terminology may be interpreted as an undoing of reification and a restoration of the dignity of the oppressed.

\textsuperscript{199} Cf. Comay 1993:113.
Epilogue

Beyond exegesis

Given the close link posited by Benjamin between seizing an image, recognizing a connectedness with the past, and constituting oneself as an agent of history, the question continues to impose itself as to whether this thematic constellation is in fact convincing. Does the redemptive-subversive intervention centered around the practice of Eingedenken constitute a viable political agenda or is it merely an expression of well-intended but politically regressive "actionistic naivete" (Tiedemann 1983-84:93)?

This question can be addressed at two levels. First on Benjamin's own terms, so to speak. This means recapitulating the transition beyond the interiority of remembrance and revisiting

200 Tiedemann associates this charge with a subcurrent of Blanquism in Benjamin's political thinking, i.e. a tendency to romanticize revolt and celebrate revolution "for its own sake" (rather than as a means to political ends). As has been seen in Chapter 1, he views this as the flip side of Benjamin's utopian messianism, which in Tiedemann's interpretation compensates for the lack of genuine political accomplishments by "quickly put[ting] together a classless society, even if it is nowhere to be seen around here" ... "in some historical beyond" (Tiedemann 1983-84:96). In leveling this charge, Tiedemann is essentially restating Adorno's general complaint that Benjamin's social analysis and political thinking lacks genuine dialectical mediation (largely due to the influence of Brecht), and that this is to the detriment both of its theological and materialist dimensions.
Benjamin’s claim that the sudden actualization (Vergegenwärtigung, GS V:1014) of moments of the past can *activate* the present. Can we make sense of this both at the individual and the collective level? And if so, are we to understand that Benjamin in the end shakes the melancholy thrust of his thinking without simply reverting to voluntarism? Approached from a different angle, I have suggested that the apocalyptic moment of Eingedenken is not only a moment of judgement but also a moment of transition to a new temporal order and a new level of practice, which is the practice of an integrated or re-integrated subjectivity. How to reconcile this with Benjamin’s commitment to a purely negative theology? Does the final transition to practice, the decisive step beyond interiority in Benjamin’s philosophy of memory mark a breach of the injunction against positive qualification of eschatological categories and thereby a shift from messianic to dogmatic thinking?

A second level of addressing the practical and political implications of Eingedenken consists in pushing a step further beyond exegesis and examining the *Aktualität* (topicality, relevance) of Benjamin’s philosophy of memory in a contemporary perspective. This naturally presents itself as a key question to Benjamin scholarship in the non-partisan tradition invoked by Habermas already in 1972 and continued by virtually all of the authors cited in this study. In raising the question of Benjamin’s Aktualität by way of conclusion, my primary concern is to detect some characteristic patterns in how Benjamin scholars have addressed it. What emerges time and again in the literature is a certain in-built weakness, incompletion, indeed moment of failure in Benjamin’s thinking, but in the final analysis, so I wish to argue, this may be integral to its contemporary relevance and appeal.
In approaching the question concerning the practical implications of Eingedenken from within Benjamin’s own philosophy of memory, the obvious reference point is the manner in which Hegel’s concept of Erinnerung, as seen in Chapter 2, involves a transition from theoretical to practical reason. Closely related to the underlying view of history as a medium of the realization of freedom, Hegelian remembrance claims an activating function on account of its ability to reconcile subjective and objective spirit in the moment of recognition that both are borne of the same process of historical experience. Erinnerung, in other words, firmly situates the remembering subject in the given context of social structures and concrete political exigencies. By reconciling the subject with his or her social environment, it returns the subject to self and thereby releases agency - as is captured in the famous dictum from the Philosophy of Right: Hic Rhodos, hic saltus ... Hier ist die Rose, hier tanze (Hegel 1970 [1821]:26). Albeit without the radical affirmativeness of Hegel’s positive dialectics, essentially the same logic is brought into play in the Marxist strategy of ideology critique. Once again exploiting the confrontation of subjective and objective spirit, ideology critique is fundamentally a matter of holding society’s agents and institutions to their own implicit standards, and by exposing the inevitable discrepancy between ideology and actual practice at every level of bourgeois society it is expected to generate both the general impetus and a concrete agenda for change that is borne of the given objective social structures.  

This process of a systematic mediation between policy and social context is

201 Interestingly, Marx cites the very Hegel passage quoted above in The Eighteenth Brumaire as a quintessential expression of the consciousness of revolutionary action (Marx 1978:14).
assumed to protect political activism against the arbitrariness of a mere voluntarism. But by adopting a radically unconciliatory stance and thereby foregoing any comprehensive mediation between subjective and objective spirit, how does Benjamin’s politics of remembrance avoid this pitfall? What is actually the counterpart in Benjamin’s thinking to the Hegelian transition within the philosophy of memory itself to the realm practical reason? Returning to the notion of Eingedenken as an awakening, we need one last time to inquire: what kind of practice is Eingedenken, and how is it politically activating?

As a first step towards shedding light on this dual question, it will be useful to briefly recapitulate the range of ways in which we have seen Benjamin defining Eingedenken as a practice. From one point of view, Eingedenken assumes the character of a submersion into a dreamlike state and is thus to be understood as a practice of connecting with the unconscious through deliberate or spontaneous intoxication. To bring this about, Eingedenken also takes the form of practice of self-modification aimed at cultivating a state of distracted attentiveness. It is in various different ways a practice of exercising the mimetic ability and a practice of anamnestic intervention in the realm of material culture, where the recognition of the object as “the scene of its fate” serves to liberate it from commodification and the drudgery of utility. Above all, however, Eingedenken is to be understood as a practice of seizing an image, pregnant with tension and significance, of the remembering subject (individual or collective) as prefigured in the past. It is a practice of recognizing in a repressed past moments of particular affinity with an endangered present and thereby orienting both past and present towards a messianic future. What all of these models for conceiving Eingedenken as practice have in common is that they involve a
certain decentring of the remembering subject and hence the negotiation of a set of fundamental ambiguities concerning the status of the will and the possibility of exerting autonomous agency. Benjamin’s essential response to this predicament consists in systematically dismantling key oppositions such as that between voluntary and involuntary, ecstatic and sober, etc. In this way he seeks to seize the phenomenology of modernity - and the characteristic sensibilities and libidinal investments associated with this - and turn it into a resource for change in an era of defeatism.

Needless to say, this agenda is supposed somehow to be objectively founded, i.e. more than an expression of mere voluntarism. But given the central observation that Eingedenken in Benjamin’s conceptualization is a mode of remembrance that refuses reconciliation, how are we to picture it as a mobilizing force and a vehicle of liberating agency? When taken up at the individual level, we do have certain means to make sense of this trope. Here the capacity to remember in the manner of Eingedenken attains vital significance on account of a radical injunction - i.e. both a moral and a psychological necessity - to confront one’s own past. Articulated in existential terms, our need to confront the past, precisely in its most difficult moments, is based on the premise that any premature settling of accounts with the past will return to haunt the present. Personal remembrance, accordingly, has to be apocalyptic in nature. In Benjamin’s conception, the confrontation with suppressed experience comes to us not only as a painful exigency but also as a moment of opportunity. The flash of self-recognition in which the subject of Eingedenken forms an image of herself is, according to its concept, potentially a moment of liberation - as can be expressed, e.g., in terms of an opportunity to break patterns of a mythic
compulsion to repeat. In Benjamin's philosophy of memory, this moment of anamnetic liberation is never definitively identified, but it is for that very reason continually kept in view as an implicit ideal and a measure of the shortcoming of any false claim to reconciliation.

When transposed to the level of collective subjectivity, the motif of an apocalyptic moment assumes a somewhat different character and the nexus between actualization and activation proves to be more difficult to account for. As we have found, social experience in many ways brings into play a remembrance that exceeds the horizon of the individual. This is the precise point in Benjamin's thinking where Eingedenken and historiography converge, i.e. where historiography takes up elements of shared remembrance and renders them operational in the public realm. Contra Hegel, however, Benjaminian re-membrance is not predominantly a matter of interiorizing and benefitting from the experience of others. It is rather a matter of connecting with what has been forgotten, with a repressed or submerged past, and thereby remaining true to the suffering of earlier generations. Thus, by proceeding according to the maxim that "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (thesis 3), Eingedenken retains a pivotal apocalyptic function at the collective level as well. But how to understand this as a political "awakening"?

I propose that the question posed here can be approached both from a negative and a positive angle. Approached from the negative angle, the act of reviving suppressed elements of the historical record in a spirit of unconciliatory judgement functions not only as a reconnection of the present with the past but also as a liberation from the past in the sense of a disentanglement from the constraining webs of historicist (mythic) narrative.
This dual dynamic of weaving and unraveling, which too may be interpreted as an intervention against compulsive repetition, is integral to Benjamin's mobilization of Eingedenken in the public domain. It recurs in the manner in which his phenomenology of experience, while thematizing the possibility of a reintegration of Erlebnis and Erfahrung, fundamentally mobilizes a destructive force in response to "humanity's longing" to be liberated from experience (GS II:218). Viewed in this perspective, Benjamin's entire reconceptualization of remembrance under the label of Eingedenken may be understood as a response not only to a socially pervasive forgetting but also to a hypertrophy of memory coming down to us from the nineteenth century in the guise of historicism. Nietzsche was highly attuned to this and launched a counter-strategy of "active forgetting" (Nietzsche 1956:189; 2,1). "Imperceptibly adjusting this strategy," I suggest, Benjamin mimetically mobilizes an anamnestic intervention against hypertrophy of memory, thus in effect seeking to release collective consciousness-formation from memory by memory.

While this strategy is consistent with the overall negative thrust of Benjamin's thinking, the attribution of a positive mobilizing function to collective Eingedenken is more contentious. What is quite obviously at stake is the notion that a retrieval of convergent shared memories, memory images that resonate powerfully in the public realm, may furnish a self-image of the collective as in some sense destined to act in the given moment. This corresponds to the experience of Jetztzeit, the perception of the present as filled with the time of the now. In an earlier section we have associated the same endeavour with the attempt to account for the possibility of a formation of subversive or revolutionary class-consciousness, the key premise being that it is necessary to mobilize memory at the
collective level in order for a disenfranchised class or group to forge itself as an agent of history, capable of intervening in and changing an otherwise impenetrable state of affairs. But in clarifying the manner in which Benjamin takes up this premise, we need to remind ourselves of the inherent ambiguity involved in any anamnestically constructed sense of group identity. Furnishing the mass subject with a positive image of itself stands in danger of being coopted for apologetic purposes, not only as an instrument legitimizing the status quo but also as a sinister force feeding into a mythologization of radically particularist causes. Indeed, this may be surmised to be one of the central concerns underlying Benjamin’s general prohibition against the positive identification of eschatological categories.

But what kind of a redemptive-subversive memory image is the collective then able to form of itself? Benjamin’s essential answer is that the stark confrontation with historical wrong that is fundamentally the thrust of Eingedenken projects a counter-image to the increasingly domesticated and pacified proletariat, namely an image of the heirs to oppression as “the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden” (GS I:700; III.:260, thesis 12). This is attributed an activating effect in direct contrast to the narcotic effect of the Social Democratic movement, which in historicist fashion has “thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren” (ibid.). The theological counterpart to this self-image of a
collectivity committed to an irreconcilable remembrance of past wrongs is found in the dialectical image in which Benjamin pictures the Messiah arriving not only as redeemer but also as avenger (Comay 1990). Our being endowed with a weak messianic power vaguely reflects the force of this function, much as the Last Judgement - the apocalyptic culmination of history at which point it will become possible for the first time to cite history in all of its moments - is subsumed by Benjamin at the human level in the form of a conception of every present being identifiable as the moment of judgement of a particular past. For the historical materialist who allows his thought to be soaked with theology but nevertheless prefers to keep this out of sight, the critical effect of mobilizing the force of judgement is to release a sense of political agency, a sense of Jetztzeit by which every present potentially appears as a moment of revolutionary possibility. To Benjamin, the past capable at any moment of suddenly galvanizing the present is not randomly accessible but rather selectively and uniquely accessible in particular constellations with the now that exceed the conscious horizon and volition of the remembering subjects. This, ultimately, lends Benjamin’s politics of Eingedenken an objective quality, potentially shielding it against the voluntarism and arbitrariness that Tiedemann impugned was its decisive shortcoming.

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202 "... the Day of Judgement would not, in this case, differ from all the others. ... Every moment is one of judgement over particular preceding moments" (GS I:1245; cf. Wohlfarth 1989:211, n32.).

203 Compare Pensky’s observation on the fortuitous tactile triggers of the Proustian mémoire involontaire: “Just this accidental quality guarantees their authenticity; for what was unwilled is above suspicion of being a mere product of intellectual volition. The correspondences they establish between present and past states of consciousness are highly nonarbitrary” (Pensky 1996:174).
On Benjamin’s Aktualität

This brings us back to the question concerning Benjamin’s Aktualität. Does the mobilization of Ein Gedanken in the public realm as envisioned by Benjamin mark a viable mode of intervention, a viable political agenda? When encountering this question in the course of my exposition, I have generally argued that to the extent that the answer is negative, the underlying problem is not unique to Benjamin but rather an indication of the prevailing objective difficulty in accounting for the formation of class identity or any equivalent collective identity-formation in a context of late capitalism and social modernity (without slipping into sinister particularisms). But this still leaves the question unanswered, what is it about Benjamin’s unique fusion of materialism and theology, and in particular his philosophy of memory, that renders it topical in a current context?

In raising this question by way of conclusion, it not my intention to settle it. I neither presume to dismiss Benjamin as outdated (whatever that would mean in light of a philosophy centered around a notion of radical untimeliness) nor to self-assuredly advocate a Benjaminian position in response to late twentieth century political challenges. When I nevertheless do intend to conclude by addressing the question of Aktualität, it is with a view to briefly recapitulating how it is taken up in recent Benjamin scholarship. It is a question which has naturally surfaced in connection with the 80th, 90th, and 100th anniversaries of Benjamin’s birth and which has profoundly shaped the tradition of non-partisan Benjamin scholarship at least since the early 1970s. What is particularly striking about this tradition of Benjamin commentary is a characteristic pattern of adopting a sympathetic - sometimes reverential - stance towards the author and yet almost invariably
maintaining a cautious distance, somehow expressing doubts about the coherence, feasibility, or pertinence of his philosophical positions. All commentators pick up on flashing insights and capturing turns of phrase in Benjamin’s writing, and it has become standard practice to accredit him with an exceptionally keen gaze for developments that have only subsequently become widely noticeable. Sometimes his work is put to innovative analytical use (such as when Benedict Anderson bases his interpretation of nationalism as “imagined community” on a Benjaminian analysis of the structures of temporality defining the condition of modernity). But rarely, if ever, does one find scholars recommend or advocate a comprehensive position associated with name of Benjamin. As a philosopher and political thinker, Benjamin has countless admirers and perceptive readers but few actual followers. The point I wish to make by drawing attention to this pattern is that it may indicate something important about the terms of engaging in Benjaminian thinking and therefore also about what it would mean in a contemporary context to embrace the concept and practice of Eingedenken.

To bring out this secret message, as it were, we need observe the pattern invoked above at play in the recent tradition of Benjamin scholarship. My point of departure in the present study was the manner in which both Habermas and Tiedemann articulated fundamental doubts about Benjamin’s politics on what has been shown to be Hegelian Marxist grounds. Both readings are characterized by a deep appreciation of the complexity of Benjamin’s thought, which is seen to mark a necessary shift in Marxist revolutionary thinking. But both authors nevertheless maintain a pronounced interpretative distance and

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204 Anderson 1991:24, et passim.
take pains to identify a basic flaw in Benjamin's account of the transition from theory to political practice. Conceivably, the main target of this criticism is not Benjamin's political thinking in its own right but rather the terms of its revival by a radicalized Western Marxism following the European student revolt. The essential message is thus that if Benjamin is to be rendered topical in a contemporary context, it will have to be in a mediated fashion building primarily on the premise that the manifest weaknesses of his position reflect his uncompromising attempt to confront an objective impasse that had overcome political philosophy during the inter-war years and still profoundly affects our political landscape. To Tiedemann, Benjamin's lasting contribution consisted in articulating a "radical concept of freedom" (Tiedemann 1983-84:95) and in contributing to "regain a revolutionary stimulus" (ibid.98). Habermas, similarly, accredits Benjamin with introducing the theme of a loss of semantic potentials into Marxist thinking and with establishing the profound implications of this for any contemporary emancipatory agenda (Habermas 1988:120ff.).

Although less concerned with the direct political implications of Benjamin's thinking and more with his standing as a literary critic and theoretician of aesthetics, Richard Wolin presents a similar dual pattern of appreciation and skepticism. He follows Habermas' argument from ten years earlier that Benjamin, viewed in a contemporary perspective, was guided by too pessimistic a philosophy of history, leading him to disregard the "essential (albeit incremental) advances in the course of historical development - advances in the spheres of universal ethics, jurisprudence, and scientific knowledge - which would not only constitute the prerequisite for every emancipated society of the future, but
without which civilization as we know it would relapse entirely into the Dark Ages” (Wolin 1994 [1982]:270). By the same token, Wolin frames his concluding remarks as a commentary on what he views as a general pattern of failures in Benjamin’s life work. He sees this as conditioned by the classical intellectual’s repression of his own genius and natural disposition as a more conventional literary critic (ibid.:272f.). Yet this “self-sacrifice” on Benjamin’s part was in Wolin’s assessment a means of remaining true to “the real historical problems with which he found himself confronted,” and Wolin therefore concludes his intellectual biography with the submission (also articulated by Tiedemann in connection with the Passagenwerk, alluding to a remark made by Benjamin in the Trauerspiel study) that “[t]oday, the ruins of this lifework still radiate more brilliantly than the triumphs of other men and women” (ibid.:274).

After yet another decade of Benjamin scholarship, McCole recasts the theme of inconsistencies and seeming contradictions in Benjamin’s intellectual production as a deliberate strategy of antinomical thinking. In this manner he presents an even more sympathetic reading of Benjamin than any of the authors previously mentioned; in certain respects it resembles the strategy of immanent critique adopted by Benjamin himself vis a vis his own key sources. Yet McCole too is highly attuned to a latent undercurrent of failure in Benjamin’s thinking and explicitly turns to this in the final pages of his study. Interestingly, he presents his observations in this regard specifically with reference to the practical implications of Benjamin’s programme of anamnestic political intervention.

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The ‘Arcades’ Project, I suggest, was guided by Benjamin’s hope that images could become legible for the historian only if an actual historical awakening was still possible. But what if it turned out that the two did not unfold together after all? What if the historian recognized opportunities to redeem lost chances, but those engaged in the real-life struggle lost to the forces of regression? Of course, Benjamin’s entire view of history was attuned to the retrieval and redemption of lost chances. But neither he nor his work were immune to the consequences of such failure (McCole 1993:302).

Following a line of reasoning established by many previous authors (and also adopted in the present Benjamin reading), McCole ultimately reverts to the premise that unresolved contradictions in Benjamin’s writing are to be viewed as a reflection of an objective historical impasse. In a final comment on Benjamin’s continuous wavering between a fascination with the phantasmagoric culture inherited from the nineteenth century and a powerful revulsion against its regressive aspects, in other words his ambivalent assessment of history as “both rich and threatening,” McCole notes:

We should bear in mind, however, that the alternation between these two attitudes toward history was not only a matter of Benjamin’s temperament. By the end of the 1930s, the course of history itself decreed that the difference between wandering through tangled thickets of delusion and gazing on ‘the bleak confusion of a charnel house’ no longer represented much of a choice. (ibid.:303).

As illustration of a more openly dismissive evaluation of Benjamin’s attempt to re-fuse politics with theological motifs, it may be informative to look to a short essay by John Milfull. The position developed here takes the form of the self-reproach of a (naive, sheltered) Western communist. It is based on a far less comprehensive reading of Benjamin than that presented by any other author mentioned in the present context, yet it speaks directly to the viability of the politics of Eingendenken by targeting the premise that the
square confrontation with wrongs in the past should serve to activate the present. Milfull argues the opposite point, namely that it is the Messianic perspective adopted by Benjamin that has a paralyzing effect. He associates this with a "logic of reversal" which "estranges, alienates in a way more powerful and insidious than industrial work; it makes us regard the daily injustice that surrounds us not as something requiring our own action, however limited, but as the sign of a need for reversal so thorough as to remove both act and actors.

... The hopelessness of the present may become not a ground for our own intervention, however apparently hopeless, but a paradoxical comfort, the ultimate alibi for inaction, which only the Messiah - who never comes - could challenge" (Milfull 1996:133f.). Therefore Milfull proposes a different, thoroughly secular perspective on history:

Should I meet Walter Benjamin's angel, panting somewhere in the ex-GDR, I shall look him/her/it as squarely as possible in the clouded eye, and say that we both should walk from now on. The wings that we spread and the storm which filled them were both illusions; we can stay and help, at the price of accepting that such time travel was only a myth, to rescue the movement we hoped to find in history, contradictory or paradoxical as it might be, from entanglement in a present which seemed to deny such ends. Kafka's crows are right; there is no heaven, and the crows are real enough. The conclusion that there are no ends of history but those we reach ourselves is a daunting one, but it is time to face it and free ourselves from the lure of the Lurian, the Messiah complex. (ibid.:134)

A very different current in Benjamin reception over the past two decades has been to view Benjamin's thinking, precisely in its idiosyncratic aspects, as anticipatory of the condition of postmodernity. This line of interpretation is no less controversial and divisive than theories of postmodernity generally speaking. It is strongly opposed, e.g., by Buck-Morss (1989:223ff., 227) and is already marked as questionable by Nägele in a 1986 volume of essays (1988:7) which nevertheless exposes Benjamin's textual corpus to a series of
rigorous deconstructivist readings. The view of Benjamin as a proto-postmodern thinker remains, on the other hand, the predominant thrust of a collection of essays edited by Gerhard Fischer (1996). Here Frisby poses the question as to whether Benjamin’s prehistory of modernity can be viewed as anticipation of postmodernity. Although leaving the possibility open that the advent of a postmodern condition might not mark an epochal break but rather an immanent thrust of modernity itself, his answer is largely affirmative. Frisby arrives at this assessment through a detailed juxtaposition of several commonly recognized features of postmodernity with key traits of Benjamin’s Passagenwerk. Among some of the most significant points of convergence may be mentioned a “shift away from the centrality of the production sphere to the centrality of the sphere of circulation, exchange, and consumption” (Frisby 1996:26); a sustained preoccupation with “the culture of things;” a profound suspicion of “grand narratives,” which Frisby sees anticipated by Benjamin’s persistent critique of historicist narrativity; an analytical focus on reproduction in art and hence an undermining of the pursuit of aesthetic originality; a sense of fundamental transformations in the structure of experience and the emergence of new aesthetic and socio-political sensibilities; the disintegration of unified subjectivity, etc. This list of significant affinities leads Frisby to identify the author of the Passagenwerk as a “contemporary” thinker, despite the fact that he did not operate with a concept of postmodernity. In support of this interpretation Frisby applies a Benjaminian principle to

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207 Interestingly, Andrew Benjamin invokes a cognate set of observations in support of virtually the opposite conclusion. In a 1989 collection on The Problems of Modernity, he presents a view of Benjamin not as a proto-postmodern thinker but rather as an inveterate
Benjamin’s own texts, namely that of a unique legibility or intelligibility occasioned by the emergence of a significant historical constellation between our present epoch and the epoch that Benjamin was principally concerned with in his late work:

If we ask why it is that Benjamin’s work seems so contemporary to us, and has done so for over a decade - and this is particularly true of the Arcades Project - then is this not because there are affinities between the past he constructed and our recent present? Are we reliving, in a new form, dimensions of experience similar to those in the Second Empire? ... Whatever the answer to these questions, Benjamin’s Arcades Project forces us to rethink the origins of modernity and its experiential transformations, not in terms of a chronology, but as a continuous process of 'coming to legibility', as a process of emergence. It constitutes one of the most stimulating attempts to explore multidimensionally the site of the metropolis and modernity (including archaeological and topographical explorations), as well as cultural productions in modernity. Many facets of his exploration are relevant for the exploration of the advent of that which Benjamin’s work did not announce: postmodernity. (Frisby 1996:30f.)

What emerges, I believe, from this brief and admittedly highly selective review of central positions in recent Benjamin scholarship is the need to find a middle ground between the somewhat arbitrary character of external evaluations of Benjamin’s political philosophy and the radical exegetical immanence towards which Benjamin scholarship otherwise tends to gravitate. An important exponent of such a “third position” is found in Irving Wohlfarth, indisputably one of the most perceptive and diversely oriented readers of Benjamin.

Wohlfarth is first and foremost an exegete, a sympathetic reader devoted to clarifying modern thinker incapable of answering to the key conceptual challenges of the postmodern condition: “The philosophical challenge at the present - indeed of the present - is to map the interarticulation of the desire for unity with the necessity of differential plurality. The limiting element in Benjamin’s conception of the interplay between tradition and experience is that it is unable to meet this challenge. The location of this limit is at the hinge separating the modern and the postmodern” (A. Benjamin 1989:138f).
centrai motifs and illuminating overlooked, vital connections in Benjamin’s work. But like most other Benjamin scholars, he incorporates an unmistakable critical distance. In a commentary on the destructive aspect of Benjamin’s critical interventions, e.g., Wohlfarth notes:

To ‘smash’ the kaleidoscope is to ‘blast apart’ the continuum of history. Not always with brute force but sometimes with ‘circumspection.’ This complex archaic impulse persists throughout Benjamin’s writing from the early ‘Critique of Violence’ to the concluding ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History.’ Today we doubtless need to consider his charged metaphors with the same detachment that the historical materialist was, according to Benjamin, to bring to the ‘cultural heritage.’ Otherwise, they will become, or remain our fetishes ... (Wohlfarth 1996:205)

In an earlier essay on Benjamin’s unorthodox fusion of materialism and theology, Re-fusing Theology, Wohlfarth casts a certain doubt upon the Messianism of Benjamin’s politics and calls into question the orientation of secular politics towards a surmised moment of final judgement. “[O]ur ‘citations a l’ordre du jour,’” he notes in conclusion “will, it seems safe to say, no longer be infallibly oriented towards ‘Judgement Day’” (Wohlfarth 1986:24). In this respect Wohlfarth anticipates the concerns expressed by Millfull, although they are articulated in less of a dismissive spirit. But what is more important is that in the same essay he charts a different critical, scholarly approach to Benjamin’s intellectual legacy. Rather than treating Benjamin’s fragmentary and chronically unfinished opus as an unassailable canon, this approach builds on a commitment to engage in Benjaminian thinking and mobilize a Benjaminian stance vis a vis pressing issues in the present. On one occasion Wohlfarth makes the point with reference to Lindner: “It matters less, Lindner concludes, to decide whether Benjamin succeeded at the task of liberating an oppressed past
than to find out whether we can measure up to it" (ibid.:17). Yet Wohlfarth is intent to push further and, if needs be, apply the critical edge of Benjamin's thinking to the legacy of Benjamin himself. What this involves, in effect, is to turn Benjamin against the institutionalized intellectual counter-culture for which he has become a prominent icon in recent decades:

What seems, at all events, to be required today is to reapply Benjamin's guiding axiom to the project it sustained. We need to learn to utilize his work, to recast its recasting, to cite it differently - neither piously nor indiscriminately. If we neither conserve his Messianism as the timeless verity it increasingly refused to be, nor jettison it as one of the lost causes it was there to save, we may perhaps arrive at a weakened, but practicable, version of his Messianic theory and practice of citation. The strength of Benjamin's Messianism lay, even at the time, in its saving weakness. ... Benjamin was perhaps the first to formulate the necessity of exchanging our cultural heirlooms for 'the small change of the actual.' (ibid.:23f.)

Once in clear focus, the strategy of reception traced by Wohlfarth can be recognized in numerous recent Benjamin readings. It is key to the position adopted by Frisby,208 as seen above, and is also integral to the interpretation presented by Buck-Morss. In her reconstruction of Benjamin's unfinished Arcades Project, Buck-Morss makes no claim to capture the author's original intention or to represent any semblance of the work as it might have evolved had Benjamin lived to publish it. Rather, her structured organization of the vast mass of textual fragments and commentary assembled by Benjamin during his Paris years is justified by a claim to its relevance in a present-day context, and this may entail a

208 Aside from the suggestion that Benjamin anticipates several important aspects of the social condition that has subsequently become known as postmodernity, the main gist of Frisby's commitment to a Benjaminian position is that postmodernity needs to be subjected to the very type of analysis to which Benjamin subjected modernity. His central message is, in other words, that "a prehistory of postmodernity is overdue" (Frisby 1996:30).
certain departure from the specific positions adopted by the author himself:

in interpreting the Passagen-Werk our attitude should not be reverence for Benjamin that would immortalize his words as the product of a great author no longer here, but reverence for the very mortal and precarious reality that forms our own “present,” through which Benjamin’s work in now telescoped. ... It follows that in the service of truth, Benjamin’s own text must be “ripped out of context,” sometimes, indeed, with a “seemingly brutal grasp.” (Buck-Morss 1989:339f.)

In this spirit, Buck-Morss concludes her study with a series of Afterimages intended to connect Benjamin’s critical sensibilities with subsequent developments and allow us to view these in a Benjaminian perspective.

To Buck-Morss, as to Wohlfarth, it is ultimately its unfinished character, one might go so far as to say its inevitable, inbuilt failures, that renders Benjamin’s thinking topical far beyond the concrete political context in which he articulated his social and literary criticism. As an ultimate inoculation against the escalation into dogmatism and particularism to which any politicization of theology - and any politics of mobilizing collective memory - is exposed, Wohlfarth emphasizes the “saving weakness” of Benjamin’s Messianism. This, of course, has been a key theme in our conceptualization of Eingedenken. It reappears in virtually every connection in which Benjamin explicitly invokes theological motifs and also forms an important subtext to his attempt to articulate a concept of involuntary practice revolving around a dialectic of distractedness and attention, self-assertion and weakness of the will, etc.

In a letter written to Scholem shortly after his 40th birthday (a time when Benjamin had already begun contemplating going into exile and is known to have entertained suicidal thoughts, cf. Scholem, 1982:186ff.), Benjamin associates the theme of weakness, failure,
incompleteness and ruin, with his own scholarly accomplishments. He paints a picture of his literary production as "utterly conditioned by the preventive measures and antidotes with which [he] had to counter the disintegration constantly threatening [his] thought as a result of ... contingencies" and singles out four books in particular, including the Passagenwerk, as works "that mark off the real site of ruin or catastrophe." Thus his overall self-appraisal is that "though many - or a sizeable number - of my works have been small-scale victories, they are offset by large-scale defeats" (letter to Scholem July 26, 1932; Corr.:396). In a 1994 review of diverse strands of Benjamin's late work, Peter Osborne has picked up on this phrase as a leitmotif for appraising the literary critic's intellectual legacy. Precisely the moment of failure and incompletion is integral to a Messianism cast in the mode of negative theology and, by the same token, integral to what it would mean, in the language of Adorno, to contemplate things from the perspective of redemption. To bring this out, Osborne concludes his study by citing yet another evocative image flowing from Benjamin's pen and in this light reaffirms the underlying consistency of Benjamin's thought:

There is an image in one of Benjamin's earliest letters, from before the First World War, that sums up his dilemma. Contrasting the logic of Jewish Messianism to the Tower of Babel, where the attempt to reach the heavens founders on the misunderstandings of the builder, Benjamin writes that the Jews 'handle ideas like quarry stones', but they 'build from above without reaching the ground'. Benjamin, one might say, wanted to build simultaneously from above and below, but the two parts could meet only momentarily, for when they do, they shatter on impact, turning matter into energy. From the standpoint of redemption, 'small scale victories' are all there is. (Osborne 1994:96)

Ultimately, the significance of this appraisal is not to explain or rationalize Benjamin's
failures, but rather to reveal them as a source of strength, prefiguring the assertion of a weak Messianic power in the realm of politics and social practice. Interestingly, Benjamin makes a related point with reference to Kafka. In the short 1938 piece correcting his earlier Kafka essay, Benjamin makes the following observation which vividly displays the characteristic pattern of self-attribution in his reading of other authors:

> What prejudices me most against that study today is its apologetic character. To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure. The circumstances of this failure are manifold. One is tempted to say: once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him en route as in a dream. There is nothing more memorable than the fervor with which Kafka emphasized his failure. (Ill.:144f.)

Taken seriously, the paradoxical commitment to failure articulated here points beyond the immanence of exegesis to a radical rethinking of practice, involving a reappropriation of defeat as liberation and oppression condemned as a source of strength. This, I have suggested, is the underlying agenda of Benjamin's concept of Eingedenken, which remains true to the negative thrust of its theological roots yet asserts this as a "progressive" force by relentlessly confronting wrongs in the past as a preserve of hope and a stimulus for change.

The critical forces brought into line here are undeniably antinomical and confront the later-day Benjaminian with striking a forever shifting balance between unstable opposites. But in the perspective of structures of domination and conformity having grown all the more massive and seemingly immutable since the time of Benjamin's own feeble attempts to identify a source of resistance to the mythic necessity of social control, and in the perspective of any mobilization of instrumental reason in the name of a just cause standing in danger of degenerating into the very exercise of violence that it was devised to oppose;
viewed in such historical perspectives, the self-proclaimed weakness and in-built lack of
finality marking Benjamin's agenda of anamnestic intervention may identified as a primary
ground of its Aktualität.
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