

Article

Judaism, Experience, and the Secularizing of Life: Revisiting Walter Benjamin's Montage of Quotation

Benjamin E. Sax

Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies, Towson, MD 21204, USA; bsax@icjs.org

Abstract: Most scholarship on the life and thought of Walter Benjamin does not seriously engage the phenomenon of religion or the philosophy of religion in his thought. While some scholarship considers Benjamin a German-Jewish thinker, placed in the company of luminaries such as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Gershom Scholem, most readers assume that Benjamin's secular identity motivated most of his inquiries and critical thinking. However, focusing on a secular sensibility obscures important elements of religious traditions in Benjamin's writings. In fact, Benjamin suggested that widely contemporary institutions like capitalism, art, and even at times science contained poignant traces of religion and religious thought. In this article, I examine these traces by revisiting his montage of quotation, which, I argue, is where we see the most salient aspects of the use of Judaism in Benjamin's thought. His desire to secularize life was inexorably related to his interpretations of experience and of Judaism. I will argue that not only did Benjamin, in fact, use Jewish theological language and imagery through his montage of quotation, but also, he used this method to secularize contemporary theological-political-aesthetic paradigms. I will also argue that this method—primarily understood through his idiosyncratic use of Jewish imagery—is critical to the writing of history.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; quotation; secularism; philosophy of language; phenomenology; political theology



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1. Introduction

"The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life." Walter Benjamin¹

"In each case what is quotable is not just the attitude but also the words which accompany it. These words, like gestures, must be practiced, which is to say first noticed and later understood. They have their pedagogical effect first, their political effect second and their poetic effect last of all." Walter Benjamin²

"This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage." Walter Benjamin³

"The events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink. The history which he lays before the reader comprises, as it were, the citations occurring in this text, and it is only these citations that occur in a manner legible to all. To write history thus means to *cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context." Walter Benjamin (*Ibid.*, 476/595)

"One does not construct monuments for the righteous, their words are their memorial." Babylonian Talmud, *Shekalim*, 7a

Each year a number of tourists congregate around a sculpture hugging the coastal landscape in Portbou, Spain. The Spanish and German governments financed a memorial dedicated to the life and death of Walter Benjamin just outside the cemetery where he

is allegedly buried. Completed in 1994, the memorial marked the fiftieth anniversary of Benjamin's death. The Israeli artist Dani Karavan, who designed and built the memorial, named his work "Passages," referring of course to Benjamin's unfinished work *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*). The structure and method of this unfinished project—a "literary montage"⁴—contained an assemblage of quotations concerning nineteenth century life in Paris. It was a long rumination on the modern urban experience. Inspired by Benjamin's unfinished work, Karavan hoped to convey an aesthetic approach to a memorial that, in some revolutionary *Benjaminian* way, associated this tormented memory of loss and exile with a more desirable, proleptically redeemed future.

The irony, of course, is that Benjamin took his own life in a *Benjaminian* way. Stories of his death have become the lenses by which many view his life (Taussig 2006, p. 6). "If death is what gives the storyteller authority," as Benjamin suggested, "then it is also subject to retellings and speculations as with the stories of his own death" (Ibid., 28). As is well known, Benjamin wrote a number of essays on the storyteller, most notably, of course, his "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" (1936). Here, Benjamin described the insurmountable chasm separating a reader from the author: A dialogue or experience between the two is perforce elusive due to the "novelist [secluding] himself"⁵. Although what makes a storyteller so effective is that he "takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (Ibid.). Can the critic also be a storyteller? Like him, a critic works in seclusion. Also, to write a critical work can represent aspects of human existence, or as Benjamin wrote of the novelist, provide "evidence of the profound perplexity of the living" (Ibid.). I will turn these questions shortly below.

Earlier in his life, Benjamin fancied himself a creative writer, indeed a storyteller. Several hundred miles down the coast of Spain from Portbou sits the vacation town of Ibiza, where Benjamin was inspired to write several short stories. A salient thread throughout these texts is a strong tendency to think about or describe the seemingly straightforward differences between rural, peasant life and urban, cosmopolitan life. Like Benjamin himself, his protagonists are usually recent exiles or displaced from a previous life. Take, for example, his narrator in the short story "The Wall." He appears to be a flaneur, who enjoys meandering throughout the town each day "through the narrow, shady alleyways, in whose networks one was never able to find the same crossing-points twice"⁶. He meets new people, notices crevices on walls and obscure photographs, and uses a map to venture on a wild escapade in search of a non-existent place, though, as it turns out, the place was the very junk shop where he started his adventure. He simply misread the signs in this "paradisiacal region" (Ibid.). Travel, Benjamin teaches, disrupts continuity and confidence: As travelers we relinquish the familiar and are open to misunderstanding or misreading situations and people. The pursuit of history requires the same disruption, which is why, as we will learn below, Benjamin sought to develop a method of quotation as disruption.

Benjamin's own story is replete with disruption. In many ways, he was not the author of this particular narrative. While fairly ambivalent about his Jewish identity, for instance, Benjamin was forced to live his life as a Jew. Yet, in death, he was buried as a Catholic named Benjamin Walter (Eiland 2014, p. 675). European society decided his fate and identity in life, as well as in death. "Even the dead," Benjamin wrote in his famous "On the Concept of History," "will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious." "And this enemy," Benjamin continued, "has never ceased to be victorious"⁷. Much of Benjamin's later writings are devoted to recovering and redeeming those forgotten voices and lost cultures. The enemy's appetite for usurpation and destruction is insatiable. In order to liberate and reclaim the past, historians must draw attention to those lower phenomena and neglected objects in addition to the myriad high-standing contributions to culture, since history must include those neglected, overlooked voices in order to provide an alternative worldview to that of the victor. Could the history of Judaism provide this alternative?

While there is plenty of evidence that Benjamin used theological language in his writings—in fact, at times addressing God, the messiah, etc.—it is, however, difficult to

demonstrate or prove that Benjamin actually held any conventional religious views or beliefs (Rose 1998, pp. 156–71; Benjamin 1989, pp. 157–216; cf. Lesch 2014). He wrote about Judaism and Jewishness, yet did not fully identify with the Jewish community. This is important. One problem in analyzing Benjamin’s religious thought is that many commentators tend to conflate theology and religion. It is difficult to discern a trenchant Jewish theology in his writing. When reading Benjamin, as Brian Britt astutely points out, “one must not only read *what* Benjamin says, but also *how* he says it” (Britt 2016, pp. 107–8). Another problem in discerning the relevance and purpose of Jewish theology and Jewish tradition in Benjamin’s life and thought is that most scholars writing on Benjamin seemed unconcerned with Benjamin’s interpretation of Jewish life, culture, and tradition. We know that Benjamin was suspicious of “religious ceremonies,” so Jewish observance or practice was not interesting to him⁸. Following the modern pattern that places faith over practice, Benjamin, at times, seems to suggest that religion more generally concerns belief⁹. Britt argues that Jewish tradition for Benjamin, in its struggle with and against modernity, was a “process of displacement” (Britt 2011, pp. 208–12). Benjamin was also suspicious of metanarratives: He rejected notions of historical progress or decline, or even eternal recurrence. Tradition as displacement portrays the myriad ways in which tradition adapts to challenges to its own relevance and meaning. Anticipating later post-structuralist claims, Benjamin also entertained the notion that Jewish tradition could be understood as inheritance through his hermeneutic of quotation (Sax 2014). Benjamin theorized about Jewish tradition and challenged ostensibly secular notions of culture. He was even cognizant of how theology more generally influenced his work. Take, for example, his widely cited claim in the notes to his “On the Concept of History:” “My thinking relates itself to theology as blotting-paper to ink: it is completely soaked through with it. But if the blotting paper had its way, nothing that was written would remain”¹⁰.

Nonetheless, making sense of Benjamin’s theology—“the blotting-paper”—is a complicated task. We know that messianism was critical to Benjamin very early and very late in his career. Yet, the *Arcades Project*, which took place in between, rarely mentions messianism. We also know that collecting quotations was critical to the *Arcades Project*, but that it was only part of the Benjamin’s work. He was also fascinated by the idea of a collector in general. While he is often associated with his writings on art and photography, he also often wrote about peculiar matters and affairs such as the collection of children’s books and toys. There was something compelling about the craft, or art of collecting: In fact, Benjamin’s caricature of the collector as the one who was in the best position to discern the material power of modernity as a “being with tactile instincts,” is useful for understanding Benjamin’s views on quotation and history, as well as time and consciousness¹¹. The art of collecting clarifies how we produce meaning through the arranging and rearranging of material objects. Benjamin interrogates this process, in fact critiques it, in order to think about new ways to produce meaning poetically, which may be applied to the study of history both practically and abstractly. In one example, Benjamin wrote that “the Paris arcades are examined as though they were properties in the hand of a collector” (Ibid., 205, 272). Benjamin not only interprets the arcades as collectors in some way, but also more importantly as material objects that disclose aspects of collective memory, or as Benjamin wrote, a “form of practical memory” (Ibid.). Benjamin, thus, would like to engage this art as a way of disrupting contemporary forms of practical consciousness and thinking. He imagines this disruption politically as “an alarm clock” designed to move people toward “assembly” (Ibid.). Benjamin plays with the German word *Versammlung* here: *sammeln* means “to collect,” whereas *Versammlung* means “assembly,” and even denotes political organizing. The collecting and montaging of quotations in Benjamin’s work, which I will explore in this article, may offer a practical and political element to the writing and thinking about history.

In order to be understand the importance of religion in Benjamin’s thought, in what follows, I will first examine how what Benjamin called the “crisis of experience” can be addressed by his montage of quotation. I will then explore how his hermeneutics of

quotation relates to Jewish thought. Scholars have pointed out that Benjamin's approach to montage is notably elusive. In fact, many have found his approach difficult to define. Yet, most agree that it is connected to dialectical experience. However, a montage of works—photos, illustrations, and other images—could appear within a text, but this might be beyond what Benjamin intended by linking his theory—"the art of citing without quotation marks"—to "that of montage"¹². Montage, as we will also learn here, is intimately related to language, and also is related to time and culture. We shall explore the question of how, then, does Benjamin link his art of quoting without quotation marks to that of montage? Is there a difference between "citing without quotation marks" and quotation itself? Montage certainly describes images, but, according to Benjamin, as we will learn here, it does something more: It can also describe time. This is where his concept of religion is crucial. Montage, we will learn, represents the *Jetztzeit*—the now-time—which is not the historical present tense, and requires an understanding of his concept of religion.

2. Experience, Language, and Life

People who learn from their experiences, who draw upon the past in order engage with the contemporary world, are considered "experienced." Experienced people are able to see a complicated, multi-layered world with myriad possibilities, and, of course, are considered wise. Yet, to be genuinely considered wise, indeed "experienced"—as one who truly learns from experience—people should not perceive the past as an agglomeration of ordinary experiences continually repeating themselves until they form into habits. Rather, "experience" comes from the insight attained through challenging moments. "Experience" requires the ability to grasp, internalize, and convey the lessons learned during those challenging moments, which also include failures. "Experience" also requires sacrifice, loss, and pain. However, are there experiences too painful, too traumatic that cannot be translated into wisdom?

Conversely, can one learn from an obstacle-free climate? Can one live in such a space and accumulate enough wisdom to be considered "experienced?" For Benjamin, such a world is considered a fantasy—the world of "Mickey Mouse," which is a "dream for contemporary man"—which is a world where "people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom existence seems to have been reduced to the most vanishing point on an endless horizon, it must come as a tremendous relief to find a way of life in which everything is solved in the simplest and most comfortable way, in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on a tree becomes as round as quickly as a hot-air balloon"¹³. In such a world, is "experience" even possible? Can experience be gained from fantasy? To pose the question more philosophically, is the wisdom gained from experience only acquired a posteriori, or can it be attained a priori? In other words, can the wisdom gained from experience require not just an acceptance of the limitations of experience, but also require a commitment to learn what might be the essence of that experience, even if it cannot, in fact, be experienced? Benjamin's concern with experience, but more particularly the experience of fantasy, did not entirely involve matters conditioned by the empirical, nor were they relegated entirely to the intelligible or intellectual. Fantasy could be experienced in both realms. This experience, as Benjamin would later articulate, would need to be differentiated from a sense of beauty in art. It would also reflect the grounded boundlessness of human experience exhibited only by those who were "experienced." Could such an experience disclose a deeper truth into the nature of how people experience the world? Is the desire to attain such an experience inherently tautological? Could it even be communicable? These questions bedeviled Benjamin for much of his writing career, but the simultaneous disruptions of the Great War, the rise of mechanized violence, the reproducibility of art, the rise of fascism and Nazism, in addition to the emergence of a robust capitalism, dramatically changed the way people experience the world, and, as such, fundamentally changed the conditions for understanding experience. Benjamin sought to disrupt and reorient these conditions so that people may have a clear sense of what they experience.

"Experience," Benjamin wrote in his short essay "Experience and Poverty," (1933) "has fallen in value"¹⁴. To understand this descent requires a robust engagement with the passing down of tradition. Before the onslaught of the Great War, experience, Benjamin argued, was circumscribed and passed down generationally through the expression of fairytales, folklore, and foundation myths. Returning to this idea in his essay "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," Benjamin wrote that "Experience [*Erfahrung*]" has not only fallen in value, but also "looks as if it may fall into bottomlessness"¹⁵. "For never," Benjamin continued, "has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power" (Ibid., 144, 440). The trauma, stress, and shock precipitated by the uncharted experience of modern warfare, for Benjamin, rattled humanity out of a sense of tradition and took away the potential for *mitteilbare Erfahrung* ("a communicable experience"). When writing about experience, Benjamin, like many of his contemporaries, drew upon the distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* (Jay 1998). To live through and process the experience of modern warfare (*Erlebnis*) and to have the ability to translate that experience into something communicable (*Erfahrung*), in Benjamin's view, simply stopped working properly because this new mechanized violence encumbered people's means to process their senses.

Adding to this problem were the contemporary linguistic and experiential shortcomings found in the vapid, journalistic jargon and discourse of most newspapers reporting on these traumatic events: "Every morning brings us the news of the globe and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories"¹⁶. These quotidian, superfluous forms of expression that characterize much of how stories are conveyed and reported upon elicit from Benjamin such visceral reactions that one imagines that they are an affront to the very nature of storytelling and narration. However, Benjamin was not a traditionalist, nor was he nostalgic. He did not discern in, nor associate experience with a quest to renew and animate foundation narratives manifested by folklore or myth. Rather, in a review entitled "Colonial Pedagogy: Review of Alois Jalkotzy, The Fairy Tale and the Present," Benjamin suggests that these superfluous forms of expression—in this case, the "reformed" and modernized German fairytales, which "allow the child to equate itself with the hero"—emerge tautologically as the foundation for a critical, "pious mode of thinking"¹⁷.

In his attempt to return to this foundation, Benjamin focused on the life and work of Baudelaire (Benjamin 1991). Here, Benjamin sought to articulate a basic *mitteilbare Erfahrung* ("communicable experience"). For example, in his seminal essay, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin revisits the uncommunicable trauma, stress, and shock precipitated by the experience of modern warfare (*Erlebnis*) in order to analyze contemporary urban life. To start, Benjamin analyzed Freud's hypothesis that there is "a correlation between memory (in the sense of *mémoire involontaire*) and consciousness" in his 1920 work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*¹⁸. Benjamin asks "how lyric poetry can be grounded in experience [*einer Erfahrung*] for which exposure to shock [*Chockerlebnis*] has become the norm" (Ibid., 318/614). Initially Freud argued that experience of trauma or shock remained separate from dreams: In fact, dreams could not be associated with traumatic experiences. However, after Freud spent time working with veterans traumatized by the experience of war, he felt that the soldiers' psychoneurosis in fact challenged his earlier observations and analysis. Thus, he argued that there was in fact a relationship between trauma and dreams, or more precisely, trauma and the continual revisiting of that experience. To answer his question above, Benjamin worked within Freud's analysis of trauma. He wrote: "The greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience [*Erfahrung*] and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience [*Erlebnis*]. Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense is the way it assigns an incident a precise point in consciousness, at the cost of the integrity of the incident's contents" (Ibid., 319/615). Modern technology had dramatically transformed people's experience of the world and Benjamin saw a similar pattern in the psychological transformation to that of

how contemporary warfare changed the *modus operandi* of *Erlebnis*: Both disrupted a basic *mitteilbare Erfahrung* (“communicable experience”). Technology disrupts people’s sensory apparatus. It challenges their sense of empirical reality. Because urbanization emerged simultaneously with the technological revolution, the traditional societal structures that informed culture and identity changed at such a rapid pace that people’s consciousness were exposed to a *Chockerlebnis*. Urbanization changed the way people viewed themselves in relation their experiences. These experiences, as a result, became a topic of philosophical and psychological investigation.

However, such investigations, as Benjamin wrote in his review “Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays War and Warriors, edited by Ernst Jünger,” may lay the foundation for fascism¹⁹. Benjamin, in contrast, sought a more dialectical understanding of these two ways into experience. Due to this collective *Chockerlebnis*, Benjamin did, in some respect, associate the modern with fascism (Ibid., 315/242). In fact, in their attempt to forget the “lost war,” the “bourgeoise turned over, to snore on its other side—and what pillow could have been softer than the novel?” (Ibid.) The novel, then, provided the appropriate space to develop a theory of the modern and could, in dangerous ways, be appropriated for fascist ends. With this danger in mind, Benjamin argued that the most germane author to develop a theory of the modern who avoids the pitfalls of fascism was, again, Baudelaire, whose life and work in the nineteenth century could best engage the new technological realities of the twentieth century²⁰. Through Baudelaire, Benjamin sought to challenge, indeed, fight against the cultural tendency to affirm fascist schemes in the collective contemplation of *Erfahrung*. He also did not want to succumb to the precariousness associated with deep philosophical engagements with *Erlebnis*. As Martin Jay argued, Benjamin expanded a theory of *ways to approach experience* without perpetuating a nihilistic theory of cultural tragedy. “What set Benjamin apart from his predecessors,” Jay wrote, “was his disdain for both the alleged immediacy and meaningfulness of *Erlebnis* and the overly rational, disinterested version of *Erfahrung* defended by the positivists and neo-Kantians”²¹.

That said, Benjamin did not always use these terms—*Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*—with consistency. Many German thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century made this distinction between *Erfahrung* (a term denoting the moment between travel [*Fahren*] and remaining still) and *Erlebnis* (a term denoting the moment between life [*Leben*] and death). At times, Benjamin wrote about the dialectical relationship between the two, whereas, at other moments, he wrote as if he was coming out of the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie*, where he accepts a fissure between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. This inconsistency reflects the difficulty in how Benjamin hoped to articulate diverse ways to engage *Erfahrung*, as *mitteilbare Erfahrung*, as a means to block this cultural impulse toward fascism. Also, despite Benjamin’s complicated relationship with Kant’s thought, he still used the term *Erfahrung* as a way integrate the distinctiveness and even, at times, the uniqueness of *Erlebnis* into *Erfahrung*, although he vehemently disagreed that this integration was necessary for a more universal, common notion of experience. What Kant would interpret as “universal,” Benjamin interpreted as *mitteilbar* (“communicable” or, more appropriately “narratable”). The adjective *mitteilbar* expresses a common quality to both people’s subjective inner experience and their experience of the empirical world. The word also denotes how experience can be circumscribed to time and place, more specifically history and culture, but not, in a Kantian sense, to a universal. This adjective, as we know, is critical to interpreting Benjamin’s work in aesthetics and in literary and art criticism: That a historically, culturally positioned work of art may convey an essential trait of *mitteilbare Erfahrung*.

The storyteller, for Benjamin, possesses a remarkable acumen in matters associated with describing humanity’s sense of finitude in relation to the natural world independent of themselves. In fact, the storyteller can subtly, though skillfully, reorient this tempestuous relationship between readers and the natural world toward an unsettling antinomy: that of the relationship between the readers’ interpretation of experience and the possibility of that experience itself. As a result, the storyteller, in a powerfully polemical way, discloses the

Sisyphean pursuits of the Kantian view of *Erfahrung* in the modern world, since a readers' sense of *Erlebnis* can never be, according to Benjamin, faithfully translated into a *mitteilbare Erfahrung*. Even though aspects of the Kantian view of *Erfahrung* endure, peoples' ability to communicate experience remain compromised, since *Erlebnis* (sensory apparatus) and cognition remain separated, making communication inaccessible.

In his critique of the Kantian view *Erfahrung*, Benjamin sought to disclose an underlying crisis of experience, whereby the two ways people experience the world are irreconcilable. Because of the collective shock experience of the contemporary technological world, the conventional Kantian way in which people made sense of experience (*Erfahrung*) became irrelevant. There were no longer any universal moral or theoretical ways to convey experience, since the intricate and, at times, unpredictable machinations of technological capitalism disrupted how people experience the world. In fact, the *Chockerlebnis* of contemporary capitalism seemed to replace the Kantian mode of experience entirely. Because the random daily occurrences characterized by the machinations of technological capitalism affected peoples' bodies and sensory apparatus in so many unforeseen ways, trying to locate a universal experience of this new reality became impossible. For example, *Chockerlebnis* not only described the experience involved in the quotidian tasks associated with urban traffic and overcrowding, but also the experience of a soldier in the trenches. It was associated with the method of montage for the Dadaists, as well as for the techniques in contemporary cinema (Ades 2006). No less troubling, as we have explored previously, it described the experience of reading the modern newspaper. As *Chockerlebnis*—both isolated and collective—continued to define modern experience, peoples' abilities to think themselves out of this experience became elusive, which, in many ways described Benjamin's understanding of this crisis of experience.

Benjamin was consumed by this crisis of experience for most of his writing career. In fact, he explored this crisis in one of his first publications, a short essay in *Der Anfang* entitled "Erfahrung" (1914). There he sought to conceive of and articulate a more valuable understanding of experience. The problem for him was twofold: on the one hand, experience as portrayed by "adults" was "expressionless, impenetrable, and ever the same;" while, on the other, mature adults assumed they have "always experienced [*erlebt*] everything," thus making it impossible for the youth to critique this unartful grasp of experience, since the youth have not accumulated much experience²². Youthful hopes and dreams are crushed by the "realistic" experiences and practicalities of their elders. The young Benjamin, writing under the spell of Nietzsche's Zarathustra and sounding similar to those he would later critique—especially Stefan Georg—he hoped for a *transvaluation* of the empty, expressionless, even nihilistic experiences of the modern world into a genuine openness to aesthetic experience. A few years after this publication, now in response to Kantian philosophy, Benjamin continued to "undertake the epistemological foundation of a higher concept of experience"²³. In an unpublished work called "The Coming Philosophy," Benjamin praised Kant's epistemological inquiries, though he was concerned how Kant's systematic endeavor to perceive knowledge as timeless and independent of human subjectivity actually limited our understanding of experience. In fact, for Benjamin, Kant's "cognizing man" prioritized the individual (as "empirical consciousness") over the object independent of the individual (the thing-in-itself), which, as in most Enlightenment thinking from Moses Mendelssohn to Christian Garve, had "the value only of fantasy or hallucination" (Ibid., 104/161).

Despite his critique of Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy, Benjamin was just as critical of the pre-Enlightenment views of experience, especially those in the theological realm. Yet, religion was important. "A concept of knowledge gained from reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge," Benjamin wrote, "will create a corresponding concept of experience which will also encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematize." "The realm of religion" Benjamin continued, "should be mentioned as the foremost of these" (Ibid., 108/168). In fact, his critique was focused on how Kant's empirical account of

experience could be ameliorated by theological views. In the same way, Kant's view would also be ameliorated by Baudelaire's account of modernity.

Within Baudelaire's oeuvre, Benjamin discovered a literary blueprint for how temporality (i.e., historical time) is *modernized* by the appearance and form of the commodity. The result is a fundamental transformation of experience. Benjamin argued that Baudelaire had the ability not only to sense and realize this transformation, but also to expound upon how the antithetical conditions of this work—that his style could remain modern, while his form (more appropriately, lyrical form) remained archaic and anachronistic—can reorient experience. Baudelaire's abilities extended to Kafka as well, which, in Benjamin's view, extended to Jewish tradition. In a letter to Scholem analyzing and critiquing Max Brod's treatment of Kafka and his worldview, Benjamin argued that "Kafka sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to transmissibility, to its Aggadic element"²⁴. Benjamin continued, "Kafka's writings are by their nature parables. But that 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 Aggadah lies at the feet of Halakhah. When they have crouched down, they unexpectedly raise a mighty paw against it" (Ibid.). Drawing attention to the dialectical relationship between Halakhah and Aggadah, Benjamin, while seemingly drawing on traditionally Jewish categories of thought, was most likely referring to the 1917 essay "Halakhah and Aggadah" written by the Jewish poet Haim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934). A few years before this correspondence, Scholem wrote to Benjamin about the unexpected death of Bialik, whose essay "Halachah und Aggadah," Scholem, reminding Benjamin, translated into German²⁵. Interestingly, when discussing Kafka, the language of Halachah and Aggadah showed up often in their writing. Scholem, and to a lesser extent Benjamin, recognized that Bialik's essay, in Nietzschean fashion no less, was a critique of the Jewish literary and aesthetic response to modernity. Bialik polemicized against and chastised this community for what he perceived to be their anemic cultural input and grievous moral failure. More specifically, Bialik was wary of how this Jewish cultural renewal that placed value of individual autonomy and aesthetics over tradition could engender a genuine secular Jewish culture, which could establish the conditions for a new way to Jewishly experience modernity. Kafka's work, as described in these conversations, seemed to be a legitimately Jewish response. However, for Benjamin, "to do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty, one must lose sight of one thing: it is the figure of failure"²⁶. Kafka's "failure" represents Jewish tradition's failure. The *Chockerlebnis* of modernity affected Judaism similarly, since contemporary Judaism was unable to successfully convey this uncharted experience [*Erlebnis*] into the set grammar of Jewish life and tradition. Yet, where Kafka failed, Baudelaire flourished. Benjamin argued that "Baudelaire patterned his image of the artist after the image of the hero"²⁷. His poetry reflected the "true subject of *la modernité*" (Ibid., 44/577). Unlike in Kafka's practice of parables in storytelling, Baudelaire's lyrical style in his poetry could simultaneously express the force of modernity's *Chockerlebnis*, while offering an alternative path. This lyrical style could not only reorient one's sense of self—subjectivity—but also replace it, thus transforming how one experiences the world. We encounter this transformation of experience in a number of individuals in Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire ranging from "the gambler" to the "flâneur"²⁸. The philosophical impact of these figures was, as Benjamin wrote in his "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," "not marked by any immediate experience [*Erlebnis*]," but rather temporally as the "days of recollection [*Eingedenken*]"²⁹. Benjamin continued:

"They are not connected with other days, but stand out from time. As for their substance, Baudelaire has defined it in the notion of *correspondances*—a concept that in Baudelaire is concomitant but not explicitly linked with the notion of 'modern beauty.' . . . The important thing is that *correspondances* encompass a concept of experience which includes only ritual elements. Only by appropriating these elements was Baudelaire able to fathom the full meaning of the breakdown which he, as a modern man, was witnessing. Only in this way was he able to

recognize it as a challenge meant for him alone, a challenge that he incorporated into *Les Fluers du mal*". (Ibid.)

The lyrical style found in Baudelaire's *Les Fluers du mal* could reorient contemporary readers—through these "*correspondances*"—away from this collective *Chockerlebnis* into a new temporal space. This is the hermeneutical practice Benjamin employed when reading Baudelaire's poetry. Take for example Baudelaire's portrayal of the Gambler: Benjamin examines him from the "psychological as well as the technical point of view" (Ibid., 331/635). A gambler desires to win, yet, "his desire to win and make money cannot really be termed a 'wish' in the strict sense of the word" (Ibid.). His experience [*Erlebnis*] is irrelevant in terms of time and fulfillment. Quoting Goethe in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Benjamin wrote, "What one wishes for in one's youth, one has abundance in old age"³⁰. It is "experience [*Erfahrung*]" that accompanies one to the far reaches of time, that fulfills and articulates time. Thus, a wish fulfilled is the crowning of experience" (Ibid.). In Baudelaire, gambling—as *correspondance*—can be poetry. "The motif [Baudelaire] treats in his night piece "Le Jeu" [The Game] is integral to his notion of modernity, and writing this poem formed part of his mission"³¹. "Gambling" in German is *Spiel*. The same word is used for "game" or "play." *Der Spieler* is "the gambler." Benjamin saw within Baudelaire's work a style where each sentence can point to myriad analogies and metaphors, which provide readers with sundry meanings and relationships. Benjamin discovered in Baudelaire's stylistic universe a form of pedagogy not only disrupting conventional meanings, but also predicated on fantasy. In fact, we also find in Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire that the notion of pedagogy itself is inexorably connected to *Spiel* ("play"). Even though *Spiel* appears in various ways in Benjamin's work, it plays a major role in his thinking on experience.

The gambler, however, remains critical to his analysis. When examining the gambler in Baudelaire's poetry, Benjamin discerned a reified form of ancient soothsaying. Take, for example, his section in the *Arcades Project* on "Prostitution, Gambling:" He asked: "Are fortunetelling cards more ancient than playing cards? Does the card game represent a pejoration of divinatory technique? Seeing the future is crucial in card games, too"³². To gamble, or to use cards, or anything else for that matter, to predict the future, requires a form of thinking—and a proclivity toward experience—that, in Benjamin's view, is, or at least at some level, unconscious. A successful gambler even engages some form of providence. In his short story "The Lucky Hand: A Conversation about Gambling," one of Benjamin's characters asks: "Do you believe that everything comes down to chance in gambling, or is there something else involved?"³³ For another character, gambling is "as natural as the inexhaustible, never depleted hope that we will be lucky"³⁴. Gambling activates, for Benjamin, an intuition that may expose the deeper machinations of human consciousness. The experience of gambling is directly related to the crisis of experience [*Erlebnis*]. "The ideal of the shock-engendered experience [*Erlebnis*]," Benjamin wrote in the *Arcades Project*, "is the catastrophe. This becomes very clear in gambling: by constantly raising the stakes, in hopes of getting back what is lost, the gambler steers toward absolute ruin"³⁵. Gambling and fate, then, become dialectically interrelated. In fact, gambling becomes a metaphor for nineteenth-century capitalism: Capitalism becomes understood as a natural outcome of some human behavior to the point where social and economic hierarchies are not only perceived as natural, but the result of "fate." Yet, the inner drive and desire to gamble leads people to fantasies disconnected from empirical reality—their *inexhaustible, never depleted hope that they will be lucky*—that obfuscates the troubling realities of the current economic structures and systems. This desire changes their experience, as well as the conditions associated with being "experienced."

Baudelaire's literary style and form, in sum, have the power to address the crisis of experience and to engage the way people experience the world vis à vis capitalism and gambling being notable challenges. In fact, and in no small way, the power of literary form is also its moral imperative: It must transform experience, as well as rewrite what experience is and ought to be. This desire to transform experience may also, in fact, reflect

a different rendering of modernity in general, in which the reified ancient mysteries concerning the sacred that had come to symbolize European spirituality and religion were transformed into the way we understand and interpret the many particularities concerning capitalism, such as market forces and economic development. In fact, in his short fragment, “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin observed that Max Weber’s notion of enchantment—in which the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution eviscerated the theological collective sense of wonder and awe—was not only incorrect, but also a dangerously inadequate way of accounting for modernity, and for modern experience. Capitalism simply replaced religion.³⁶ This is crucial to understanding the importance of Benjamin’s notion of religion. The new world created by capitalism was merely an extension of the religious world where the sacred and the holy were discerned through the domain of economic production and development, market forces, and consumption. Capitalism, in all its glory and splendor, operates like a functional theological system replete with all the accoutrements of a robust religion, such as unfounded beliefs and seductive superstitions, powerful religious hierarchies inexorably bound to its own clerisy of prophets (economists) and priests (business leaders), its own art (advertising) and iconography (public relations), and, of course, its own political theology, as stated above, that is understood as a natural outcome of some human behavior to the point where social and economic hierarchies are perceived as natural and moral. This was, for Benjamin, a crucial problem facing modernity and the modern experience: the literary form needed to challenge this new, conventional way of experiencing not only nature and the world, but also other people.

3. Quotation, Experience, and Hermeneutics

How experience relates to form is an important question intimately related to the degree to which people are cognizant of how these forms represent and portray their contemporary social and political moment. How they respond to these forms demonstrates their access to them. A deeper question into how experience relates to form is whether all people at a given social-historical moment see their own experience in the broader culture they reside in. Not only is the relationship between experience and form perforce historically and culturally conditioned, but it is also, in a post-colonial sense, a reflection of structural power (Foucault 1977). Modern experience, according to Benjamin, was defined by this relationship, which was best reflected by his contemporaries’ inability to make sense of modern experience, especially through the conventional forms of ritualized behavior, social and aesthetic norms, and traditional ways of thinking. Form was supposed to make sense of one’s experience. In response to the crisis of experience, Benjamin sought a new form that could liberate experience in such a way that it could powerfully transform his contemporary social and political situation. Quotation, for him, or more specifically, a montage of quotation, was that form.

Quotation was an essential component to all of Benjamin’s writing, which achieved its complete expression in his *Arcades Project*, a work that needed to “develop the highest degree of citing without quotation marks.” “Its theory,” as mentioned in the beginning of this article, “is intimately related to that of the montage”³⁷. To cite without quotation marks is a way to engage the other. It is dialogical. It is also a venue for the silent or oppressed to speak: It opens up possibilities for new voices to be heard and engaged. It is also not limited to the printed or written word. The efficacy of the montage of quotation is perforce related to medium and context. In a section titled “The Quotable Gesture [Gestus]” in the second version of his short essay “What is the Epic Theater?” (1939) Benjamin placed quotation in the context of theater. It may function like montage—as a way of disrupting the present moment—but it relies also on the gesture:

“Quoting a text entails interrupting its context. It is therefore understandable that the epic theater, being based on interruption, is, in a specific sense, a quotable form of drama. There is nothing special about the quotability of its texts. The difference lies in the gestures which are built into the play . . . ‘Making gestures quotable’ is one of the signal achievements of the epic theater”³⁸.

In this passage, Benjamin explored the how theatrical gestures may be also quoted and how they may realize sacred space. In fact, quoting Berthold Brecht, Benjamin wrote that an actor's highest feat is "making gestures quotable" (Ibid.). Quotations of texts as performance in this context reimagine the primary role of the actor as a living embodiment of the quoted text. Just as a basic typesetter determines the place of particular words on paper, actors, in a similar way, determine the place of gestures on stage. The stage becomes the venue where gestures reveal the inner meaning of texts. Just as a typesetter brings texts into the world for individuals to quote, an actor brings the quoted word to life through gesture. The actor becomes more than just a medium. This task, in "making gestures quotable," performs an important philosophical role as well: It brings to life the same cognitive process used in writing and producing texts. It combines various forms of intellectual stimuli. An actor is in a unique position to disclose deeper meanings of words and concepts. As a result, an actor emerges as the embodiment of an authoritative text (a text to be quoted) and has enormous power to convey, what Benjamin wrote in an earlier version of the essay, "the social significance and applicability of dialectics"³⁹. In fact, Benjamin argues that this power—attained by "making gestures quotable"—may be the pinnacle of epic theater in general.

Quotation interrupts or disrupts context. The quotable gestus performs similarly. Unlike in written texts, though, disruption or interruption in the performance of acting is by nature ephemeral and always relies on the particular context of the performance. In order to experience these interruptions or disruptions, the audience must know its context. A basic relationship to tradition, therefore, is important here since the performance of such interruptions or disruptions relies on the uninterrupted performance of the actor. The context also raises a number of hermeneutical questions: What, for example, is demanded of an audience? Is the audience required to interpret the stage and the actor's gestures in the same way they would the written word? Is there a relationship between the audience (the reader), the stage (the text), and the actor (the quoted text)? Can a performance reorient an audience's sense of context? Finally, why does Benjamin not differentiate between the performance of a text and the text itself, or between a viewing audience and a reading audience?

Even though Benjamin did not convey a clear answer to these quotations, nor articulate a formal hermeneutical method in general, he did, however, argue that interpretation follows several stages of development. First, readers discern knowledge in a text that is perceivable, but not always visible or apparent. Secondly, readers interpret the text philologically so as to "avoid the false depth of uncritical commentary"⁴⁰. Thirdly, readers participate in a "socially critical interpretation"⁴¹. Finally, readers may engage issues of social theory with aesthetics, which emerges as a what he termed a "synthetic interpretation"⁴². Discerning and articulating these stages are essential to Benjamin's understanding of history. Very similar to the view of Friedrich Schlegel—as well as to that of other Romantics—Benjamin viewed history as a culmination of three separate, though interrelated moments. History starts with a writer: the decision for the historian to write about history. The second moment is related to first: It is the moment when the historian decides on a topic. The third relates to tradition. Because tradition operates similarly to language, all writers are bound to the conventions and ideologies of their living context. Take, for example, the phrase "the Middle Ages." In the European context, historians divided history into periods. An idea of a "middle age" emerged during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Italian writers sought to distance themselves from previous "ages" by asserting a more immediate kinship with ancient Rome than their predecessors: in sum, a renaissance. During the two subsequent centuries, many denizens of the Enlightenment also sought to distance themselves from these perceived dark ages by articulating a narrative of a historical decline of the Roman empire, which witnessed reason and law replaced with irrationality and superstition. The shibboleth of the "middle ages" functioned to allow for a teleological understanding of progress and history, but only as understood from its renewed origins in the Renaissance. For Benjamin, then, we could imagine a historical

narrative, but it could only function heuristically. As with the case of the “middle ages,” once a writer deracinates the culmination of these three moments, or realities, any vestige of historical truth disappears.

Language is the substance of history. Benjamin saw in this substance a linguistic connection that continually informs the language of the present to the past. Historians, as writers, are also conditioned by this substance. They must work in an environment that allows the languages of the past to continue to grow and change in the same way we understand contemporary speech. Meaning is contextual, sometimes elusive, but always dialogical. In this way, Benjamin’s concept of language is not reductive. Just as the world independent of ourselves—i.e., the physical or phenomenal world—can be ideologically determined, so too can language—i.e., as ideas technically conditioned. As a result, we still run into the problem of indeterminism: Can a historian make any claim to historical truth, even with this caveat? To answer, we will return to Benjamin’s understanding of quotation below.

The myriad languages of the past, for Benjamin, produce numerous diverse and multilayered texts. These include, but are not limited to, *inter alia* the concealed texts of architecture (of buildings and their blueprints) and urban planning, the language and style of public policy, and formal reports, which can, at times, disclose their “dialectical poles”⁴³. While recognizing the differences between these languages and forms of communication, historians still see these languages as inexorably connected to one another. Thus, a historian’s style can be misleading. A detached, objective style that includes documents and “objective” narrative—what is termed “social history”—does not consider the process of how one selects diverse, and at times very dissimilar texts in a subjective way. Benjamin approached this process differently. He preferred ontology. Texts circumscribe speech. To study history is to engage the ontology of a text. A historian must consider how a text constricts the natural dynamism and flexibility of spoken language into the more organized and disciplined structure of the written word. In so doing, the historian would disrupt the “objective” narrative of continuity and succession. In sum, this disruption would be a quotation. It would quote the real world.

All historians quote texts. To engage the ontology of a text, our understanding of quotation needs to be expanded. Each time a historian quotes a text to disrupt the conventional epoch—taking into account the fluidity of spoken language—disruption proliferates. Through these disruptions, quotations from disparate texts can communicate something new when placed with other, older texts. They can even discern how the process of writing changes or does not change over time. Benjamin even imagines a moment when this process of disruption—through quotation—informs and changes a historian’s speech or language, or even, her or his process of writing. This disruption is critical. Only when historians are able to grasp how the disparate and diverse languages present in any text prevent them from fully discerning an “objective” meaning or from producing an “objective” narrative, can they free themselves from the endless assault of social and economic powers.

Benjamin’s hermeneutic of quotation, at this point, is critical then to defining his theory of dialectic. Quotation disrupts and unsettles the notion that a text is permanently closed. It also challenges the process by which any text is ascribed meaning by the language of those in power. This even includes “revolutionary texts:” those texts that resist the status quo. Historians, in this case, may establish a dialectical image through quotation by combing disparate texts, which can shift their worldview and use of language in unexpected ways. Not only could their style bring a new, more radical understanding of language into the world, but also it could emerge as a language of political action and social change. Even though texts describe the world, they also contain aspirations for a different world. Quoting, for Benjamin, is a way to make these aspirations, ideals, and dreams real. There is, then, returning to his concept of religion, a messianic component to Benjamin’s view of quotation here.

The messianic element is not only limited to the writing of history. We know, for example, how Benjamin used a montage of quotation in the *Arcades Project* and in “One-Way Street.” In those works, he drew attention to those “articles lost”⁴⁴, and “old maps” (Ibid., 466/117) that speak to obsolescence, to the marginalized, and to those whose names have perished. However, he saw the efficacy of the montage of quotation earlier in his life through the medium of the novel. In his essay, “The Crisis of the Novel”—a short review of Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz: Die Geschichte von Franz Biberkopf*—Benjamin not only links the montage of quotation to the Döblin’s style, but he argues that: “The stylistic principle governing this book is that of montage. Petty-bourgeois printed matter, scandal-mongering, stories of accidents, the sensational incidents of 1928, folk songs and advertisements rain down in this text. The montage explodes the framework of the novel, bursts its limits both stylistically and structurally, and clears the way for new epic possibilities”⁴⁵. For Benjamin, Döblin’s montaging of fragments of history, popular culture, and the abounding patterns of contemporary capitalism into his work is not only a powerful way to blur the distinction between the empirical world and the world of art, but also a way to re-engage the concepts of *Erlebnis* and *mittelbar Erfahrung*. Many scholars of Benjamin’s life and thought argue that this method of montaging came out of the modern artistic movement of Dadaism, that began sometime around the First World War. Because its counter-cultural tendencies, works of art within this movement were often associated with the surreal and were considered aberrant and nonsensical. The movement sought to mock the existentialist impulse to make sense of a world without any meaning. In doing this work, as in Döblin’s novel, artists used ephemera from real life—newspapers, train tickets, buttons, invoices, etc.—within their works of art. In fact, Benjamin even refers to their methods in his third version of “The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility,” (1939)⁴⁶. He argued that their work as montage “was a ruthless annihilation of the aura in every object they produced,” in which their aesthetic reproductions dismantled the work of art’s original authenticity. Montage in the literary sense does the same, since it likewise, as cited above, “explodes the framework of the novel”⁴⁷. In fact, “for the first time,” Benjamin wrote, “[the montage] has been placed at the service of the narrative.” “Biblical verses, statistics, and texts from hit songs,” Benjamin continued, “are what Döblin uses to confer authenticity on the narrative. They correspond to the formulaic verse forms of the traditional epic” (Ibid.). This method of a montage of quotation in Döblin’s writing, for Benjamin, vitiates authorial authority, and, in fact, makes it difficult for readers to discern the “author’s voice” (Ibid.). Even Döblin’s characters seem to take on a life of their own. Benjamin argued that this montage of quotation in the novel—especially in Döblin—opened up incredible opportunities to not only reengage the structure—and even genre—of the novel, but also served as a reflective medium to reimagine how readers experience the world. Similarly, quotation in the *Arcades Project*, as we will learn below, will become Benjamin’s medium to reengage that experience.

4. The *Arcades Project*: Quotation, Montage, and the Medium of Reflection

When studying Benjamin’s views on quotation, most scholars correctly look to Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*⁴⁸. Benjamin “was a born writer,” according to Hannah Arendt, and “his greatest ambition was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations” (Arendt 1968). Keeping in mind Arendt’s hyperbolic observation, readers of the *Arcades Project* still inevitably encounter a persistent problem: How do we read and interpret an unfinished work? The genre of Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, then, remains a conundrum. Some argue that this work is merely a collection of notes, the research for a number of related academic projects. Others argue that this work is a work itself: a modernist achievement. Regardless, readers are bedeviled by the almost prohibitive, though still philosophical question of its potentiality and its actuality. We know that for over a decade, Benjamin assembled a wide array of documents, ephemera, and other materials in order to compose this text. His subject, of course, was the Paris arcades. We also know that he did hope to write this book entirely of quotations⁴⁹.

Situated in the Parisian neighborhoods stretching from the Opera House to the Palais-Cardinal, the nineteenth-century arcades provide for Benjamin a window into Charles Baudelaire's observations and experiences. Not only is Benjamin's *Arcades* text replete with quotations from texts that attest to Baudelaire's life and work, but it is also, more generally, a massive collection of quotations. Benjamin allows these quotations to remain alone—in fact he went out of his way to separate them from his commentary. Returning to the conundrum above, readers may easily arrive at the conclusion that Benjamin sought to separate his writing from the collections of quotations, suggesting that the work, indeed, may be this modernist achievement. In fact, Benjamin worked on it for at least a decade, so the fact that the quotations remained isolated, and without interpretation, may point to this conclusion as well⁵⁰. The work itself emerged as an important representation of how the interconnections and relationships of nineteenth-century Parisian social factors impacted thought and behavior. Benjamin organized the *Arcades* thematically, yet did so through the quotations of emblematic figures. It also portrayed the salient philosophical-aesthetic and political tropes surrounding surrealist origin and utopian proclivities, which, in Benjamin's language rooted the "wish-image" and "dream image" in the *Arcades Project* as a type of *dialectical fairytale*, or what Charles Fourier, quoted by Benjamin, termed "studied whims"⁵¹. Even though Benjamin examined these concepts in numerous other essays, for many scholars of Benjamin's thought, almost all of his work during the 1930s, in one way or another, drew from his *Arcades Project*. Yet, the crisis of experience still consumed Benjamin.

In fact, the *Arcades Project* most profoundly addresses the crisis of experience—the tension between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* (or more specifically, *mittelbar Erfahrung*). There, Benjamin continued to analyze the coming together of technological capitalism with literary modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century European context. In this text, Benjamin addressed his early problem with the Kantian notion of *Erfahrung* with actual, material historical context. The concept of *beyond time and space*—both in a theological (more specifically, apophatic theology) and a philosophical sense—is subject to, in Benjamin's text, not only the problem of addressing the infinite absolute to experience, but also of addressing it to history. In a messianic manner, Benjamin hoped to disclose not only a valuable approach toward actually experiencing this crisis of experience, but also a way to redeem it dialectically. To use contemporary language, the present—i.e., the current time—is perceived and engaged as a moment of crisis and flux. Benjamin argued that how one experiences the world philosophically—as aiming toward some Archimedean point to perceive "truth"—can provide new ways to engage the present moment vis-a-vis the past that can also disclose a future (even messianic) when history comes to an end. As a result, the crisis of experience in the present moment bespeaks two possible political outcomes: fascism or communism.

These two outcomes also bespeak a philosophical tension between the potential and the actual. This tension played a role in Benjamin's doctoral dissertation. Published in 1920, Benjamin's "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism" grappled with the legacy of Romanticism; particularly how a Romantic view of criticism informs contemporary ideas of aesthetics and general philosophy. Benjamin argued that these figures—most prominently, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), Georg Phillipp Friedrich von Hardenberg (pseudonym: Novalis) (1772–1801), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854)—transformed the role of criticism in culture and thought. Whereas criticism used to be a way to gauge the quality of a work of art or literature, what was understood to be the role of aesthetics, these thinkers redefined the way criticism could engage these works. They contended that a work of art was a "medium of reflection" that could "be set in relation to other systematic lines of thought"⁵². This medium, thus, could engage other forms of knowledge and experience.

As was the case with many concepts in Benjamin's theoretical work, the phrase "medium of Reflection" was not a blueprint, nor a *modus operandi* of a systematic or a fully developed philosophical argument. Rather, it expressed a quasi-mystical Romantic notion

regarding the endless possibilities and potential in individual words, including quotations. Literally speaking, philosophy cannot be quoted. Rather, philosophers may quote texts or use “terminology” that represents a philosophical view (Ibid., 140/43). In exploring this position, Benjamin analyzed inter alia the work of Novalis and Schlegel in relation to their philosophical interlocutors. Their primary interlocuter, in Benjamin’s view, was Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who, through the concept of “reflective thinking,” influenced the early Romantics to consider how the process of “thinking” can be best described as “reflective thinking about itself” (Ibid., 121/18). He, according to Benjamin, “defines ‘reflection’ as ‘reflection of a form,’ and in this way proves the immediacy of the knowledge given to it” (Ibid., 122/20). So, reflective thinking, in this view, considers the subject and medium or means by which a subject knows itself, to be interchangeable. Even though Schlegel did not use the term “medium,” Benjamin argued that Schlegel’s notion of the absolute was best termed a “medium of reflection” (Ibid., 132/36). We shall learn shortly how this phrase is also helpful in understanding his method of quotation in the *Arcades Project*. In the note to this phrase, Benjamin wrote that “reflection itself is a medium,” while “the medium in question is one such that reflection moves within it—for reflection, as the absolute, moves within itself” (Ibid., 189/35). In fact, Benjamin not only argued that the phrase itself is broad enough to encompass a “Romantic” view of the absolute, but also that this view of the absolute belongs to the realm of art and aesthetics, not to what Benjamin describes as “Fichte’s ‘I,’” which I shall discuss below (Ibid., 127–135/27–40). He also revisits the potential tautology expressed in his essay “The Origin of Language as Such and on the Language of Man:” That not only does everything in existence communicate itself, but also communicates a metaphysical essence. For example, “reflection,” as we just read above, “as the absolute, moves within itself” (Ibid., 189/43). As was the case in Benjamin’s description of language, reflection also communicates itself, while also communicating a metaphysical essence. The medium of language functions similarly to the medium of reflection: Both can apply criticism as a way that engages the “absolute.”

A salient issue in the “Concept of Criticism” is how art may produce meaning in contemporary times. Whereas Kant sought a critique of judgment—art as subjective—Schlegel, Benjamin averred, sought an objective critique of art. Schlegel’s “medium of reflection,” in Benjamin’s view, provides the best opportunity to engage art in a contemporary setting, while reflecting on the origins, ideas, and medium of art itself. It can also provide, according to Benjamin, an objective way to engage art critically (Ibid., 140/50). According to Benjamin, the Kantian challenge to the mere possibility of aesthetics bedeviled most of Romantic thought. Yet, within the Romantics’ hope to address this challenge—by replacing the Cartesian ego with the work of art—we also find their most salient philosophical innovation: Reflection as the boundless potentiality of a form of aesthetics. It is also thinking that is capable of producing form: “This form is the thinking of thinking” (Ibid., 127/27). Reflection is capable of the same production. In no small sense then, Benjamin’s hope in his dissertation was to develop a theory of the work of art as an expression of that boundless potentiality.

What Benjamin terms “Fichte’s ‘I’” is critical to understanding how this theory will function in contemporary criticism. “Fichte’s ‘I,’” in Benjamin’s estimation, is coterminous with the Cartesian Ego. When conveyed as “Fichte’s ‘I,’” reflection is represented as a singular, completed moment or action. In fact, it is an “active deed,” an “original action,” and “a fait accompli,” “because the subject of the proposition is the absolute subject, the subject pure and simple, then in this one unique case the inner content of the proposition is posited together with its form” (Ibid., 128/29). Following Kant, Fichte saw a natural affinity between reflection and the realm of the Cartesian ego. It is in this move that Benjamin takes issue with Fichte: “For what in Fichte occurs in only a ‘single’ case, as a necessary function of reflection, and what in this single case has constitutive significance for something comparatively objective (namely, the active deed)—this process by which the mind becomes the ‘form of the form as its content’ takes place, according to the Romantic intuition, incessantly, and first of all constitutes not the object but the form, the infinite and

purely methodical character of true thinking" (Ibid.). In contrast to this view—especially reflection as a completed act—Benjamin argues that criticism is incomplete and open.

Unlike in the work of Fichte, the German Romantics understood criticism as reflecting something objective; beyond mere opinions, personal attitudes and sentiment. It is "a formation whose origin is occasioned by the work but whose continued existence is independent of it" (Ibid., 177/109). Criticism—like commentary in Jewish tradition, as I will discuss below—may complete the work of art and can draw out truths independent of the subject (Ibid., 160–63/81–85). The work of art itself as a medium, for the Romantics, conveys this objectivity. Also unlike in the work of Fichte, which sought to limit the role of reflection through a "virtue of immediacy," a "self-consciousness" that "is already present and does not need to be evoked though a reflection that in principle is endless," the Romantics sought to proliferate these forms of reflection through criticism (Ibid., 125/25). So the potential of a work of art is predicated upon its ability to serve as a medium. Criticism, then, exposes how a work of art serves as a medium for its coming into being, or its own actuality. To even exist at all requires that something be discernable or knowable through the medium of how it appears. So criticism, in Benjamin's view, makes the work of art knowable through this medium. It also discloses the potential of a work of art.

It was precisely this argument—that the "medium of reflection" expresses the boundless potentiality of a form of aesthetics—in Benjamin's early study on the German Romantic tradition that reappeared in his later study, the *Arcades Project*. Also, in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility," Benjamin wrote about how fascism attempts to organize "distracted" masses to "aestheticize politics" with the hope to engage in war⁵³. Fascism reorients people away from their own sense of self as individuals to think in terms of people, or more appropriately, as masses. This reorientation changes the way people read and reflect, since their "reception in distraction" obstructs the potential for a genuine or true mass movement to take shape. By distracting a public toward a perceived unified goal or end, fascism, in Benjamin's view, denies the public—a collective sense of self—its most genuine condition or state, which is found in its continued potentiality as an unfinished or unrealized collective, and, which, as we will see shortly, is unpacked further in his *Arcades Project*.

In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin transformed his "medium of reflection" into a "medium of work." Benjamin reoriented the classical claim of a work of art as an independent form and substance. He argued that a work of art, rather, demands a response. In his *Arcades Project*, he sought to do the same with work. For example, Benjamin's work—in this case, the "Arcades Project"—cannot be contained by a singular genre, nor can it signify an independent form. Also, the name of the work itself does not describe his independent work (a single author), nor does it reveal an independent work. To read, or to work within, the *Arcades Project* requires a different form of engagement. Readers do not engage or criticize an author and his or her text, but rather they enter into dialogue with myriad textual traditions (not always consistent with one another). To read in this manner challenges the way we classify works and genres, as well as what we would call tradition. As in the case with the "medium of reflection," to engage Benjamin's *Arcades Project* requires readers to not only reflect upon what the work actually is, but also in what it may become.

The potentiality of this work, then, is not simply a literary montage, as we learned earlier, but rather a montage of time. Readers of this work are continually disrupted: they travel back and forth between sections and reading ceases to be linear, which affects a general sense of time. Readers also confront the challenge of predicting and ruminating over the absence and presence of quotation marks. This is an important characteristic of this work. Quotation marks indicate repetition. The montage of time indicates the tension between being and becoming. These two features of Benjamin's style present a methodological program. The repetition of quotation marks, for example, possesses a messianic component to this style (as we learned above), but they also feature a paradoxical redemptive quality: that quotation is redemptive only after quotations are stripped of their quotation marks. In other words, they cease to be repetitive. Benjamin writes, "there

can be no appearance of repetition in history, since precisely those moments in the course of history which matter most to [the historian], by virtue of the index as ‘fore-history,’ become moments of the present day and change their specific character according to the catastrophic or triumphant nature of that day”⁵⁴. Quotation marks, in this sense, may function like a *Mise en abyme*, by coping and repeating a quotation within a text made up entirely of quotations to portray an eternal recurrence or an infinitely recurring sequence of quotations. It also raises the problem of losing quotation marks. The medium of work is found in the medium of repetition. The montage not only incorporates disparate texts in relation to one another, but also juxtaposes historically and chronologically inconsistent ideas and images together. Thus, the success of this montage may be found in its ability to portray the dialectical tension between the appearance of historical texts and the illusion of them being present.

Benjamin hoped to unearth the ontology of nineteenth-century language and discourse for an audience living in the subsequent century. As we learned already, Benjamin used quotation as a form of disruption. In this case, quotations will be used to accomplish two goals: (1) to obscure historical language, thus stripping the reader of confidence, power, and authority, and (2) to employ a montage of quotations—a dialectically composed language—that is impossible to situate in any ideologically motivated (or commercially driven) notions of historical continuity. Benjamin’s style here would resist the objective-documentary-narrative style described above. This style would also call attention to Baudelaire’s sense of irony. Because the sentences will be composed of quotations and the language itself would be entirely circumscribed by them, Benjamin would be able to reorient the reader away from this objective-documentary-narrative style toward a more radical though, ironic sensibility: i.e., Benjamin will indulge in the conventional authoritative and hierarchical use of quotation—similar to how he interpreted Karl Kraus’s method of quotation—in order to expose how the capitalistic commodification of language operates⁵⁵. The style of quoting, for Benjamin, also possesses an epistemic quality: It will not disclose truth in history, but will only disclose a myth of eternal recurrence. In fact, ideological prosopopoeia plays a role here too: In the objective-documentary-narrative style of traditional historians, capitalism can be ambitious, markets can express worry, which all feed into the illusion that this economic system fosters an ordinary everyday living devoid of politics. When paired with capitalism, the language of objective-documentary-narrative style is able to configure a worldview that imagines a preindustrial world—devoid of any politics—where this economic system can imitate, and even replace nature.

To undermine this view, Benjamin, in the *Arcades Project*, sought to reorient how we respond to nature by imagining how the study of nature was similar to the study of history. In so doing, Benjamin returns to Goethe. Through a study of Simmel’s “presentation of Goethe’s concept of truth,” Benjamin discovers that his view of *Ursprung* in his *Trauerspiel* book was “a rigorous and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history”⁵⁶. He continues, “Origin—it is, in effect, the concept of *Ur*-phenomenon extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history” (Ibid.). Readers of Goethe argued that he developed a method that uniquely explored and engaged nature. Benjamin, in this passage, argues that Goethe’s method could be employed to study history. Benjamin was wary of this proclivity to use Goethe’s methods in other contexts of life, yet for him, this application of Goethe’s method in this context was not so much inaccurate or misguided as it was unfinished. “Now, in my work on the arcades,” he wrote, “I am equally concerned with fathoming an origin. To be specific, I pursue the origin of the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and I locate this origin in the economic facts. Seen from the standpoint of causality, however (and that means considered as causes), these facts would not be primal phenomena; they become such insofar as in their own individual development—‘unfolding’ might be a better term—they give rise to the whole series of the arcade’s concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants” (Ibid.). To illuminate how these “riches” inform a complex,

beautiful, and creative life of nature is precisely how Goethe's method is amenable to the investigation of history. In transposing "this basic Goethean concept," Benjamin, in this passage, seemed to be advocating for a soft form of *Lebensphilosophie*, where "life" becomes the primary source for history.

This method is not the same as those biographers of Goethe, who sought to use Goethe's life and method to engage culture and history⁵⁷. The salient critique that emerged from Benjamin's readings of these figures was grounded precisely on the problem of the inconsistency of a "lived life." That is, historians somehow may disclose the unique form of life in the same way they reveal the unique forms of history. In fact, the famed naturalist historian Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954) normalized the view that Goethe's method—his empiricism—legitimized Meinecke's, as well as his colleagues', own philosophical-historical methodology which understood the "essence of historicism" as the "substitution of a process of *individualizing* observation for a *generalizing* view of human forces in history" (Meinecke 1991). Thus, to cast any doubt on this Goethean method requires critics to underscore the tendentious way Goethe himself radically reoriented nature to rationalize his interpretation of it. This method emphasized a higher structure or form of nature that is ordered primarily out of subjective experience, which presents a formidable philosophical challenge, since the life of nature exists independently from an individual's perception of the phenomenal world. Nature is grasped merely in an idealized form. To interpret history in this way, for Benjamin, is to recognize that historians assemble history merely out of its sources, or more precisely, out of its quotations, to discern a higher structure or form of life. Benjamin wants to engage this intellectual process. Constructing history in this manner, for Benjamin, presents the same philosophical challenges in engaging the life of nature. Historians a priori begin their work with a subjective, idealized sense of history. Benjamin sought to "break" with this "historical naturalism," that fits source material into a primal template by which history is to be understood⁵⁸. Benjamin is not outright rejecting this "historical naturalism," rather he is casting doubt—in the way ones does with a Goethean method—on how we engage the established natural order independent of our experience of it. Quotation, for Benjamin, is the realm in which historians may engage a deeper, more natural (?), awareness of the past.

Quotation requires tradition. In writing, as we have seen already, quotation marks serve an important role in both the service to and rejection of tradition. Quotation marks also denote authority. They demonstrate how to articulate old ideas in new ways, yet, their appearance already compromises a sentence's originality. Quotation marks may even point to the problem of the eternal recurrence of the same, in which the content of the past remains authoritative and unchallenged. For Benjamin, however, the absence or presence of quotation marks in any given text points to temporality: They express the reality of disparate events or moments in historical time. These events or moments are portrayed chronologically and are interpreted as continuous. They prove narratives, metanarratives, traditions, and ideologies. Benjamin writes in his *Arcades Project* that "it may be that the continuity of tradition is mere semblance. But then precisely the persistence of this semblance of persistence provides it with continuity" (Ibid., 486/609). Quotation marks are able to effectively communicate "continuity" with persistence and authority.

The impulse to place quotation marks within the narrative design of tradition assumes a continued and constant temporality. Quotation marks not only link tradition, then, to progress—as a continuation of tradition, or as a pointing toward its immutability and permanency—but they can also disrupt that continuity. The inheritance of tradition belies a deeper, more tumultuous relationship between the permanence and ephemerality of language and meaning. Tradition can also represent a discontinuity or a rupture, which is best displayed through quoting without quotation marks (Ibid., 458/572). If true, then the passing of tradition, in this case, requires disruption and discontinuity. Because of the dialectical—indeed adversarial—nature of the relationship between tradition's permanence and ephemerality, the communicability of experience (*mitteilbar Erfahrung*) within this tension or difference is relegated to a specific time and place. Missing quotation marks, then,

communicate a misplaced, or disrupted historical-temporal context. The lack of quotation marks indicates something else too, despite the textual markers: the quoted statement itself. A quotation then—whether contained within quotation marks or not—points to repetition. In this context, the quotation raises, for Benjamin, an important concern: how to use quotations to disrupt conventional narratives and worldviews, while repeating conventional historical-temporal-linguistic patterns? If readers are able to see the connection between unmarked quotations and temporality, then Benjamin's temporal montage is able to disrupt the ontological and temporal historicism—i.e., the dialectical image—reinforcing Goethe's, as well as Meinecke's, historicist methodology. Benjamin sought to use quotation in a way that not only explained how this dialectical image emerged and functioned, but also emphasize the problematic relationship between historicist methodology and the communicability of experience (*mitteilbar Erfahrung*).

Yet, when engaging the *Arcades Project*, readers do not simply learn a “communicability of experience,” they must also must recognize and acknowledge a form of traditional mastery of a textual tradition. As in Goethe's historicist methodology, Benjamin's form of montaging quotations points toward a hermeneutic that seems to operate within the tension between “a communicability of experience” and a mastery of tradition, although it also seems to require an enduring sense of ambiguity. We also run into the problem that Benjamin himself did not entirely master this tradition. In an unconventional and idiosyncratic way, Benjamin's craft of montaging was similar to the craft of collecting: His quotations were, in fact, intimate collections of his reading experiences. In 1931, Benjamin published a short autobiographical essay in *Die Literarische Welt* entitled “Unpacking my Library”⁵⁹. In the process of unpacking his library, Benjamin explores the myriad experiences connected to material books, whether they include the probability of returning a borrowed book unread, charting a city in an obsessive quest to obtain books, or to provide “insight into the relationship between a collector and his possessions, into collecting rather than a collection” (Ibid., 486/388). Personal libraries disclose how people organize and privilege knowledge and wisdom. Unpacking a book discloses “to a true collector” how “the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth” (Ibid., 487/389). There is a childlike enthusiasm in the way a collector rediscovers and reengages an old book. There is also a reprioritizing of one's influences. Once a book rests on its new shelf, it acquires a new place on the collector's hierarchy of wisdom. The book attains its rightful, renewed place in the collector's new library. Personal libraries pattern a particular bibliophilic and intellectual montage, which, according to Benjamin, unveil distinct experiences in his own spiritual autobiography. Yet, the experiences contained within this personal library are not readily assessable to others. They require, as we will learn below, commentary. The art of collecting, whether books, or art⁶⁰, as Benjamin wrote in the *Arcades Project*, “is a form of practical memory, and of all the profane manifestations of ‘nearness’ it is the most binding”⁶¹. The language of “profane manifestations of ‘nearness’” sounds both earthy and ethereal, secular and theological. In a world grappling with a crisis of experience and of tradition, the collector, in the case of Benjamin here, the book collector, models a way to think about the past, an original context—in this case, the place of material books on a former shelf, or in a bookstore—in relation to the present (i.e., the unpacking on one's library). Writing on this point Giorgio Agamben suggests: “The collector also ‘quotes’ the object outside its context and in this way destroys the order inside which it finds value and meaning. Whether it is a work of art or any simply commodity that he, with an arbitrary gesture, elevates the object of his passion, the collector takes on the task of transfiguring things, suddenly depriving them both of their use value and of the ethical-social significance with which tradition endowed them” (Agamben 1999). Benjamin's authorship in the *Arcades Project* is indistinguishable from his role as a collector. He “quotes the object outside its context” and he maintains some historical distance from the work. This point becomes clearer when we consider that Benjamin never saw the publication of this work.

The *Arcades Project*, then, is the *Urgeschichte* of the nineteenth century. The quotations in this work disclose both a history and a history of philosophy. Even though the work,

in some sense, allegorizes nineteenth-century Paris, it also provides the hermeneutical vantage point to grasp how the social imaginary of nineteenth-century capitalism plays a critical cultural role in determining the meaning of everyday objects in contemporary life. His method of montaging quotations not only discloses the “profane manifestation of nearness” of mundane, quotidian objects found in everyday life, but it also opens up people to the possibility of discerning the allegorical system undergirding contemporary capitalism. It provides readers the apparatus for metacognition and to reorient themselves away from the religion without a dogma, that is, capitalism. Benjamin provides his own intellectual autobiography as an example. Once readers discover that Benjamin’s choice of quotations reflect a tendentious, though existential trace of his reading experiences, they will learn how their reflection on his choices reveal a new moment of reading and a new path into history. Benjamin lays out this point clearly. He writes: “Say something about the method of composition itself: how everything one is thinking at a specific moment in time must at all costs be incorporated into the project at hand”⁶². Quotation functions quasi-epistemologically at this moment.

Benjamin’s montage of quotation, in sum, reimagines, or more specifically, reengages, the relationship between materialism, dialectic, and history. This hermeneutic will allow readers to appreciate how nineteenth-century language informs the consciousness of twentieth century political and cultural thinking. It will also allow Benjamin to illustrate how this language was not only produced dialectically, but also illustrate how his hermeneutic of montaging quotation disrupts and challenges conventional, capitalistic teleology. The framework of this new language is, in fact, the montage of quotation. It will undermine the style of the historian’s documentary sentence structure by appealing to the style of Baudelaire’s wit and irony. Benjamin hoped to impair the historian’s hierarchy of intellect, which, for him, was governed by the language of commodities. Their language already disclosed an eternal recurrence of the same. Although contrary to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, their current eternal recurrence is portrayed by boundless capitalism: the myth that the commodification of life perpetuates the illusion that each day can be experienced and lived without any attachment to politics, indeed an imagined return to nature, where life makes sense only without politics. An illusion that not only empowers fascism, but also perpetuates the crisis of experience.

5. Jewish Thought, Quotation, and the Secularizing of Life

Benjamin’s montage of quotation anticipated numerous concepts and ideas commonly associated with later post-modern thinking. His method has also enjoyed an afterlife in modern Jewish thought. His commitment to recovering lost and marginalized voices, his obsession with language, and his borderline prophetic, messianic persistence toward carrying out platforms of social justice have all been translated, by numerous commentators, including at times by his friend Gershom Scholem, into the Jewish mystical language of Luranc Kabbalah. Even though Benjamin, like Scholem, was not a disciple of Isaac Luria’s teachings, his work did aspire to, in political ways and in a Lurianic metaphysical sense, to “repair the world” [*Tikkun Olam*]. Generations of commentators have articulated the connections between Lurianic mysticism and Benjamin’s oeuvre by focusing on his near obsession, as I have also done here, with the quotidian minutiae of everyday life, the fragments, as well as the quotations, which, in Lurianic terms, disclose, for these commentators, the “holy sparks.”

Benjamin also was cognizant of the similarities between his characterizations of the Jewish commentary tradition and his *Arcades Project*. The *Arcades Project* is replete with references to Jewish tradition, theology and history. However, commentary was central to Benjamin’s thinking about tradition both generally and Jewishly. Drawing upon Scholem’s use of Kabbalistic imagery, Benjamin hoped to unlock those messianic sparks from words in the same way that Jewish tradition hopes to do so by reading sacred texts through commentary. Kabbalah, like other aspects of Jewish tradition, assumes a *hermeneutic* foundation that informs how Jews interpret texts. To read *Jewishly* is to engage in a conversation

with the diverse Jewish readers and interpreters throughout the centuries. The Torah requires commentary because the Torah, in Yerushalmi's reworking of the rabbinic axiom, "is finished, but not completed" [*tam ve-lo nishlam*] (Yerushalmi 1991). Experience is circumscribed to the dialectical relationship between readers and their sacred texts. For Benjamin, the process of commentary was dynamic and dialogical, but also not always mysterious. When we read the marginalia—in Derrida's terms, the traces—of sacred texts, we participate in almost a natural process: In the same way that animals in forests etch tracks into the landscape toward food and water sources for subsequent generations to follow, commentators provide similar paths in sacred texts. A commentary, like those tracks left by forest animals, becomes part of the textual landscape. Through a tradition of commentary, we travel down the same philological and hermeneutic road as our ancestors. Animals and forests change each other in a way that sacred texts and commentaries do the same. Jewish tradition functions like an ecosystem: nourishment requires balance. "Bear in mind," Benjamin wrote in his *Arcades Project*, "that commentary on a reality (for it is a question here of commentary, of interpretation in detail) calls for a method completely different from that required by commentary on a text." "In the one case," he continued, "the scientific mainstay is theology; in the other case, philology"⁶³. Not all commentary, then, discloses a secret on how to unlock messianic sparks. Similar to the process of Talmud Torah, study itself—simultaneously Scripture and commentary—has the ability to do this work (Ibid., 462/577).

Benjamin's connection to modern Jewish thought is found precisely on the interrelated issues of messianism, tradition, and commentary, argued Gillian Rose in an essay entitled "Walter Benjamin—Out of the sources of modern Judaism," and his contribution, she continued, is best studied through a careful engagement with the basic aporia of post-Kantian thought, since Benjamin used these conventional Jewish theological means to address them (Rose 1998). Even though Benjamin was able to diagnose the problems associated with modern experience, his response, for Rose, was inadequate. "[Benjamin] knows no divine or human law, no Torah, revelation or democracy," she wrote, "beyond the ancient violence of law in Greek tragedy and the arbitrary subjective rule over things of the judgment of man from the biblical Fall, to the Christian Baroque, and, [she argues], to the spirit of Fascism" (Ibid., 99). Rose's critique discloses another aspect of Benjamin's philosophical method: that within his effort to disclose the categories of judgement and critique replete within the crisis of modern experience is the risk of tautology or even eternal recurrence of the same, since these same categories are vulnerable to the dialectical relationship between melancholy and subjective sovereignty, which characterize history. Memory, indeed the biblical command "to remember," is the way Benjamin sought to convey the fragments and incompleteness of history. Not only is this way, according to Rose, Benjamin's explicitly Jewish response to the crisis of experience and the incompleteness of history, but it is also his weakest philosophical method. "The need for Talmud Torah, local jurisprudence, the complex contextuality of the commandment, seems to have been forgotten," Rose argued, "in [Benjamin's] invocation of *Zakhor*" (Ibid., 109).

Considering Rose's astute critique of Benjamin's Jewish philosophical response to modernity, her critique does not address the montage of quotation in the *Arcades Project* which may, in my view, offer a more compelling formulation of modern Jewish categories, especially regarding Benjamin's "invocation of *Zakhor*." The *Arcades Project* still adopted a Jewish theological archetype, even if it was idiosyncratic or obscure, in developing its style and method. For example, revelation, when understood in medieval Jewish philosophical or even mystical terms, involved dreams, which could not be prevented or banned. Dreams were too deeply unstructured and unformed to successfully replace conventional theological approaches, yet they were precarious enough to still pose a legitimate danger to authoritative forms of tradition (Wolfson 2011, pp. 117–28). Therein lies the strategy: this work strove to awaken readers from the slumber of the nineteenth century, while at the same time, pointing them toward the theologically redemptive, the more emancipatory proclivities dormant in each individual, to awaken them through

tradition, or more specifically, in a theological language shaped by Jewish tradition. In this way, Benjamin, in his invocation of *Zakhor*, was interested in revelation, not dogma. Through the *Arcades Project*, he hoped to provide patient and thoughtful readers a *mitteilbare Erfahrung* (“a communicable experience”), which would not only point them toward a deeper understanding of their current theological-political predicament, but also toward a deeper engagement with reality and temporality, or more specifically, with history. This is the place where we discover Benjamin’s messianic undercurrents within this work.

As is already well known, Benjamin made this point in the *Arcades Project*, where he discussed the role the concept of “origin” played in his “*Trauerpsiel* book”⁶⁴. What made this method *Jewish*, for him, was “in effect, the concept of *Ur*-phenomenon extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history” (Ibid.). He argued that his *Arcades Project* sought to understand the same thing: “fathoming origin.” As we saw earlier, Benjamin associated the pagan context of nature with Goethe and contrasted it with a concept of history. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin placed this concept of history within the contours of Jewish tradition. In fact, in his earlier drafts on his essay the “On the Concept of History,” he suggested that this Jewish view of history not only provided “a conception of the present as now-time shot through with the splinters of messianic time,” but also that central to Jewish theological experience is the practice of publicly reading the sacred texts that recount the particular history of the Jewish people⁶⁵. While recognizing that “Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future,” he argued that contrary to the future-oriented hope of contemporary historicism, Jewish tradition would place this hope in the opposite direction: toward history as collective memory, in which “the Torah and prayers instructed [Jews] in remembrance” (Ibid.).

“Collective memory,” Jan Assmann wrote in his book *Religion and Cultural Memory*, “is particularly susceptible to politicized forms of remembering” (Assmann 2006). The crisis of experience, as Benjamin wrote, was precisely the moment where remembrance in the form of collective memory is politicized. In Benjamin’s view: “What science has ‘determined,’ remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts”⁶⁶. Benjamin saw the danger in those who employ history and use aphorisms such as “never again” or “remember Amalek” to justify or to organize support for a common politics. These aphorisms continue to advance the problematic narrative of victors and losers, as well as that of perpetrators and victims. Adding to the problem are inter alia memorials, songs, poems, paintings, photographs, movies, flags, and all other corresponding rituals and ceremonies which elevate and commemorate these narratives. Many modern societies commemorate the past publicly. As Benjamin wrote in his *Arcades Project*, “politics attains primacy over history” (Ibid., 388–389/491). “The facts,” he continued, “become something that just now first happened to us, first struck us; to establish them is the affair of memory” (Ibid., 389/491). Usually, then, representations of public remembrance take the form of military victories. They call on the public to appreciate the gravity of the past on the present. These memorials convey a past that has been completed and passed on to the present. Very few, if any, denote a sense of the past that remains incomplete. Nor do they represent a continually changing sense of collective memory.

Yet, these memories, as well as the collective that employs them, are contingent upon a cultural-political context, and, for the most part, are ephemeral. For example, very few people remember Nazi memorials, and, in the American context, we are seeing a concerted effort in numerous cities, such as in Baltimore, to stop “remembering” Southern Civil War heroes and white supremacists⁶⁷. “If monuments are values made visible, it’s likely you ignore the ones around you,” wrote the philosopher Susan Neiman. “Values are most visible,” she continued, “when they’re under threat” (Neiman 2019, p. 266). Thus, we also know that the values enclosed in memories of those counter narratives—such as “the South will rise again”—are as relentless as they are dangerous. Sometimes these memories

disappear, sometimes they last for millennia. Remembering becomes part of belonging, whether collectively or individually, and people end up looking toward tradition, whether culturally or religiously, toward a specific body of symbols, myths, and narratives, to discover meaning within the buried memories of a distinct people. Jan Assmann termed this process “cultural memory.” “With cultural memory,” he wrote, “the memory spaces of many thousands of years open up, and it is writing that plays the decisive role in this process”⁶⁸. Yet, “cultural memory is complex, pluralistic, and labyrinthine; it encompasses a quantity of bonding memories and group identities that differ in time and place and draws its dynamism from these tensions and contradictions” (Ibid., 29).

As we have seen in this article, Benjamin used Jewish theological language and imagery to not only draw upon this dynamic process of cultural memory, but also to secularize contemporary theological-political-aesthetic paradigms. In his essay “On the Image of Proust,” he employs this “Lurancic” hermeneutic to argue that the paradigmatic, indeed ideal form for a critical essay would consist of a “*textum*,” “a web” of quotations woven together from a diversity of unrelated texts⁶⁹. Returning to Benjamin’s bookshelf for a moment—described in his essay “Unpacking my Library”—we could imagine two bookcases, one for Jewish theological books and one for works *inter alia* in philosophy, history, art and aesthetics, and the natural sciences. Benjamin’s engagement with Jewish tradition would be best gauged by the significance he attached to the wisdom contained in material Jewish books by locating them within the hierarchy of wisdom displayed on his shelves. However, for Benjamin, any book that makes its way onto his shelves and into his personal library is categorized idiosyncratically, and in a disjointed manner. This reflects the experience of modernity. Quotation functions similarly. He will use this “Lurancic” hermeneutic toward a more secular end. This is where cultural memory is important.

Even though Assmann does not draw upon Benjamin’s montage of quotation in his articulation of cultural memory, the similarities are still important: Cultural memory is intertextual. For both Assmann and Benjamin, cultures obtain their identities through a reframing of shared quotations—cultural and textual—which helps craft new meanings and articulate new experiences. While Benjamin described this process as a montage, Assmann and John Czaplicka drew upon a term derived from classical Greek rhetoric, *hypolepsis* (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995). A term employed by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to denote some cognitive condition that involves understating truth, *hypolepsis* is difficult to define given its close proximity to other terms relating to judgment, conception, impression, opinion, and even supposition (Aristotle 1984). A montage of quotation in the language of *hypolepsis* is a continual dialectical process built upon speech acts that take into consideration judgment, conception, impression, opinion, and supposition, whereby speakers infinitely quote previous speakers in order to establish and maintain new opportunities in discourse for innovation and for tradition. Indeed, cultural memory, as Assmann and Czaplicka argue, is “self-reflective” in the same way, because it “draws upon itself to explain, distinguish, reinterpret, criticize, censure, control, surpass, and receive hypoleptically”⁷⁰. Benjamin’s “invocation of *Zakhor*” in his montage of quotation similarly involves *hypolepsis*: Because the montage of quotation is a dynamic archive of memories, symbols, values, and texts, which dialectically unfolds and reinterprets itself, the act remembering is self-reflexive and the process of cultural memory is more fluid. The montage of quotation, like cultural memory, is less an affirmation of the past or even a teleological understanding of the present, but rather appeals to the grammar of life, of a living, active culture.

The montage of quotation, then, is an all-encompassing “invocation of *Zakhor*.” It is not merely *aggadic*, that is to say, it is not only mediated by literary texts. It includes rituals, ceremonies, festivals, liturgies, architecture, monuments, works of art, and myriad other values and symbols. For this reason, and despite his resistance to using direct, or conventional theological concepts, Benjamin recognized that he could not fully neglect theological discourse, since “experience forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological”⁷¹. The experience of remembering may not require the language of theological

belief or a commitment to a doctrine. However, Benjamin wrote, “past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain . . . If one takes the lack of closure seriously, one must believe in the Last Judgment . . . Perhaps with regard to incompleteness, there is a difference between the positive and the negative, so that only the injustice, the horror, the sufferings of the past are irreparable” (Ibid.). The experiences of the past *prima facie* assume a general theological claim that the lives of those who are “slain” somehow endures. Benjamin’s “invocation of Zakhor” here would be inconsistent with a non-theological point of view which could not accept Benjamin’s insistence that in order to write history, historians accept that remembrance is not only related to experience, but is also related epistemology. The reason is, in this instance, that to accept experience as not only a form of *hypolepsis*, but also accepting the assumptions based on an interpretation of those feelings, would be at best misleading to classify as experience. Such an understanding of experience would not be useful for a secular historian. It is, then, in this way that a *mitteilbare Erfahrung* (“a communicable experience”) functions theologically as *Zakhor* in Benjamin’s montage of quotation.

With this in mind, I would like to return to Benjamin’s memorial. Inscribed on the monument is a quote from Benjamin’s annotations to his “On the Concept of History:” “It is more arduous to honor the memory of the nameless than that of the renowned. Historical construction is devoted to the memory of the nameless”⁷². Debate over the authenticity of Benjamin’s grave continues even until today. We may not know if he lies in the grave assigned to him. Yet, in thinking about how a “communicable experience” operates in our relation to a memorial or grave, we should immediately recognize that the land covering the entire colonized world is filled with nameless, unidentifiable graves pointing to the memories of the inhumanity of building civilization. We must find a way to remember despite the invisibility of these graves. Just as Benjamin’s bodily remains survive in mystery, so does memory. Can any monument, work of art, or literary quotation, or any form of remembrance stand up to this overwhelming sense of invisibility? To invoke *Zakhor*, to employ the montage of quotation, for Benjamin, in the face of the nameless and the invisible, is to remind oneself—hypoleptically even—that memory occurs in language, and to dig into the past, to those deep and buried ruins, is also to dig into those suppressed memories of our more violent selves that often surface when translating language into life. It is to remind ourselves, as he famously stated in his “On the Concept of History,” that “there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”⁷³.

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Notes

¹ (Marcus et al. 1996, p. 255). Hereafter SW. (Benjamin 1972–1989), 11. Hereafter GS.

² (Benjamin 2003) “Aus dem Brecht-Kommentar,” GS 2.2, 506.

³ (Benjamin 1999, p. 458); “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 572.

⁴ *Arcades*, 460; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 574.

⁵ Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Lestov,” SW 3, 146; “Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows,” GS 2.2, 443.

⁶ (Benjamin 2016, p. 124); “Die Mauer,” GS 4.2, 755.

⁷ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” SW 4, 391; “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” GS 1.2, 695.

⁸ Benjamin, “Berlin Childhood around 1900,” SW 3, 386; “Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert,” GS 7.1, 432.

⁹ Benjamin, “Anmerkungen,” GS 2.3, 838.

¹⁰ Benjamin, “Anmerkungen,” GS 1.3, 1235.

- 11 *Arcades*, 206; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 274.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 458; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 572.
- 13 Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” SW 2, 734–735; “Erfahrung und Armut,” GS 2.1, 218.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 731; “Erfahrung und Armut,” GS 2.1, 214.
- 15 Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” SW 3, 143; “Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows,” GS 2.2, 439.
- 16 Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” SW 3, 147; “Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows,” GS 2.2, 445.
- 17 Walter Benjamin, “Colonial Pedagogy: Review of Alois Jalkotzy, *The Fairy Tale and the Present*,” *The Storyteller*, 196 and 198; “Kolonialpädagogik,” GS 3, 272 and 274.
- 18 Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” SW 4, 316; “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,” GS 2.2, 611.
- 19 Walter Benjamin, “Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warriors* edited by Ernst Jünger,” SW 2, 312–321; “Theorien des deutschen Faschismus: Zu der Sammelschrift *Krieg und Krieger*. Herausgegeben von Ernst Jünger,” GS 3, 238–250.
- 20 *Arcades*, 10–11; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 54.
- 21 Jay, “Experience without a subject,” 195.
- 22 Walter Benjamin, “Experience,” SW 1, 3; “Erfahrung,” GS 2.1, 54.
- 23 Walter Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” SW 1, 102; “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie,” GS 2.1, 159.
- 24 Benjamin to Scholem, June 12, 1938, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932–1940*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere, ed. Gershom Scholem (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 225.
- 25 Scholem to Benjamin, July 17, 1934, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932–1940*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere, ed. Gershom Scholem (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 126.
- 26 Benjamin to Scholem, June 12, 1938, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932–1940*, 226.
- 27 Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” SW 4, 39; “Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire,” GS 1.2, 569.
- 28 *Arcades*, 855–56; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.2, 1024–1025.
- 29 Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” SW 4, 333; “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,” GS 1.2, 638.
- 30 *Ibid.*, Benjamin also quotes this line from Goethe in his short story “The Lucky Hand: A Conversation About Gambling,” *The Storyteller*, 190; “Die Glückliche Hand: Eine Unterhaltung über das Spiel,” GS 4.2, 774.
- 31 Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” SW 4, 330; “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,” GS 1.2, 634.
- 32 *Arcades*, 514; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 640.
- 33 Walter Benjamin, “The Lucky Hand: A Conversation About Gambling,” *The Storyteller*, 187; “Die Glückliche Hand: Eine Unterhaltung über das Spiel,” GS 4.2, 771.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 190; “Die Glückliche Hand: Eine Unterhaltung über das Spiel,” GS 4.2, 774.
- 35 *Arcades*, 515; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 642.
- 36 Walter Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” SW 1, 288–290; “Kapitalismus als Religion,” GS 6, 100–103.
- 37 *Arcades*, 458; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 572.
- 38 Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theater?” (II), SW 4, 305; “Was ist das epische Theater? (II),” GS 2.2, 535.
- 39 (Benjamin 1998); “Was ist das epische Theater? (I): Eine Studie zu Brecht,” GS 2.2, 530.
- 40 *Briefe*, 629.
- 41 *Briefe*, 774.
- 42 Walter Benjamin, “On the Image of Proust,” SW 2: 239; “Zum Bilde Prousts,” GS 2.1, 313.
- 43 (Benjamin 2017); “Die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs,” GS 3, 195.
- 44 Walter Benjamin, “One-Way Street,” SW 1, 468; “Einbahnstraße,” GS 4.1, 119.
- 45 Walter Benjamin, “The Crisis of the Novel,” SW 2, 301; “Krisis des Romans: Zu Döblins *Berlin Alexanderplatz*,” GS 3, 232.
- 46 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (third version),” SW 4, 266–67; “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (dritte Fassung),” GS 1.2, 502.
- 47 Walter Benjamin, “The Crisis of the Novel,” SW 2, 301; “Krisis des Romans: Zu Döblins *Berlin Alexanderplatz*,” GS 3, 232. See note 45.
- 48 This particular topic of the *Arcades Project* has inspired many monographs, articles, and lectures. In my view, Susan Buck-Morss’s *The Dialectic of Seeing* remains a classic in Benjamin studies. Her book lucidly and compellingly engages the structure of the project. She argued that the fragmentary nature of the work—because Benjamin did not live to complete it—is in fact the most compelling

aspect of it, since, in a way, it follows the logic that Benjamin himself associated with the work. His critique of modernity and its inevitable, inescapable demise reflected the incompleteness of the project. In fact, one could argue that the experience of the Paris Arcades, the experience of the contemporary city is no less disorienting—in fact, much like the montage-like experience—of today’s internet. See ([Buck-Morss 1999](#)).

- 49 Although an uncomplete work, the quotations assembled in the *Arcades Project* were posthumously published as foundational philosophical works on Charles Baudelaire. See ([Benjamin 1973](#)).
- 50 The exception, of course, is convolute J, which was edited in to Benjamin’s essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.”
- 51 *Arcades*, 57–58; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 106.
- 52 Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism,” SW 1, 135; “Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik,” GS 1.1, 40.
- 53 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility (second version),” SW 3, 120–21; “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (zweite Fassung),” GS 7.1, 382.
- 54 *Arcades*, 474; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 593.
- 55 Sax, “Walter Benjamin’s Karl Kraus: Negation, Quotation, and Jewish Identity,” 9.
- 56 *Arcades*, 462; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 577.
- 57 Walter Benjamin, “Comments of Gundolf,” SW 1, 98; “Bemerkung über Gundolf: Goethe,” GS 1.3, 827. See ([Bielschowsky 1914](#); [Ludwig 1913](#); [Friedrich 1920](#); [Georg 1921](#); [Mosse 1982, 1985](#); [Mosès 1986](#); [Barner 1992](#); [Hartung 1994](#); [Hague et al. 2001](#)).
- 58 *Arcades*, 461; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 575.
- 59 Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” SW 2, 486–493; “Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus: Eine Rede über das Sammeln,” GS 4.1, 388–396.
- 60 Walter Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,” SW 3, 260–304; GS 2.2, 465–505.
- 61 *Arcades*, 205; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 271.
- 62 *Arcades*, 456; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 570.
- 63 *Arcades*, 460; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 574. See note 4.
- 64 *Arcades*, 462; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 577. See note 56.
- 65 Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” SW 4, 397; “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” GS 1.2, 704.
- 66 Walter Benjamin, *Arcades*, 471; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 589.
- 67 Fenit Narrapil, “Baltimore Hauls Away Four Confederate Monuments After Overnight Removal,” *The Washington Post*, Aug 16, 2017.
- 68 Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 28.
- 69 Walter Benjamin, “On the Image of Proust,” SW 2, 238; “Zum Bilde Prousts,” GS 2.1, 312.
- 70 Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 132.
- 71 *Arcades*, 471; “Das Passagen-Werk,” GS 5.1, 571.
- 72 Walter Benjamin, “Anmerkungen,” GS 1.3, 1241.
- 73 Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” SW 4, 392; “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” GS 1.2, 696.

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