Benjamin's Afterlives: Reading Walter Benjamin in the Works of David Markson, Susan Howe, and Teju Cole

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Abstract

This thesis reads the work of the twentieth-century German-Jewish philosopher, Walter Benjamin alongside two contemporary American writers – David Markson and Teju Cole, and one poet, Susan Howe. Taking Benjamin's notion of afterlife, or *Nachleben*, as my conceptual framework, I argue that David Markson, Susan Howe, and Teju Cole constitute contemporary 'afterlives' of Walter Benjamin.

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Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

For clarity, I will provide a full citation of a work when it is initially referenced in each chapter, followed by an abbreviation for subsequent references unless noted otherwise. References to the following frequently cited texts will be given the following abbreviations:

AP	Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999)
RB	David Markson, *Reader's Block* (Chicago; Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996; repr. 2001)
LN	David Markson, *The Last Novel* (Berkeley, Calif.: Counterpoint, 2007)
NN	David Markson, *This is Not a Novel* (London: CB Editions, 2001)
NM	Susan Howe, *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (New York: New Directions, 1989; repr. 1993)
OC	Teju Cole, *Open City* (London; New York: Faber and Faber, 2011)
OGTD	Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998)
SW	Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, trans. various, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, et al, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1997-2003)
TM	Susan Howe, *The Midnight* (New York: New Directions, 2003)
VP	David Markson, *Vanishing Point* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004)

Introduction

Benjamin's Afterlives: Reading Walter Benjamin in the Works of David Markson, Susan Howe, and Teju Cole

> Historical 'understanding' is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the 'afterlife of works', in the analysis of 'fame', is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general.
>
> – Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*[1]

> Thumbed pages: read and read. Who has passed here before me?'
>
> – David Markson, *Reader's Block*[2]

> The relational space is the thing that's alive with something from somewhere else.
>
> – Susan Howe, *The Midnight*[3]

> Wonderful stars, a distant cloud of fireflies: but I felt in my body what my eyes could not grasp, which was that their true nature was the persisting visual echo of something already in the past.
>
> – Teju Cole, *Open City*[4]

In a chapter entitled 'Benjamin in Boyle Heights', Norman M. Klein pursues a thought experiment proposed by Mike Davis: Walter Benjamin boards a ship to New York and moves to Boyle Heights, a neighbourhood in downtown Los Angeles. He mingles with Schoenberg, has 'a somewhat tortured version of a power lunch' with Bertolt Brecht, writes 'a *Chronik* on Hollywood studios', and becomes obsessed with a local detective. Klein even imagines where Benjamin would have eaten ('Clifford's cafeteria downtown').[5] Klein is not

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[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin ed. by Rolf Tiedmann (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 1999; repr. 2002), [N2,3], p. 461. Subsequent references to this text will be abbreviated to *AP*.

[2] David Markson, *Reader's Block* (Chicago; Normal, Ill.: 1996; repr. 2001), p. 10. Subsequent references to this text will be abbreviated to *RB*.

[3] Susan Howe, *The Midnight* (New York: New Directions, 2003), p. 57. Further references are to *TM*.

[4] Teju Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 256. Subsequent references to this text will be abbreviated to *OC*.

[5] Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 233-234.

the only writer to envision an alternate biography for Benjamin. In John Schad's novel, *The Late Walter Benjamin*, a protagonist named Walter Benjamin lives on a council estate in post-war Watford; and David Kishik's novel, *The Manhattan Project* (2015), literally revises the chronology of his life: in 1940, Benjamin fakes his own death and 'arrives in Lisbon with forged identification papers and boards the next ship to New York' where 'his daily research leads to the composition of a sequel to *The Arcades Project*, which he calls either *The Manhattan Project* or *New York, Capital of the Twentieth Century*.'[6] In the afterword to her book *Walter Benjamin*, Esther Leslie recounts artist Lutz Dammbeck's video installation, 'What if he survived?' Like Klein, Dammbeck also situates Benjamin in Los Angeles, where he assists in Adorno's 'Authoritarian Personality' project, participates in Timothy Leary's LSD experiments, and collaborates with Heinz von Foerster on computer prototypes. In this version, Benjamin never becomes famous, but dies 'a forgotten man in an old people's home in Ann Arbor.'[7]

Why is Dammbeck's question, 'What if he survived?' such a compelling line of inquiry for critics, artists, and novelists? Perhaps because it is impossible to write about Benjamin without encountering and, so often, retelling, the agonising last facts of his life. It is well-known that Benjamin intended to emigrate to the United States, where he hoped to finally settle and establish a career at the Institute for Social Research among his exiled compatriots. Although he left Paris in June 1940, just days before the Wehrmacht entered the city, and had the good fortune to be awarded a visa from the National Refugee Service, Benjamin trekked through the Pyrenees with Lisa Fittko and other refugees, only to be detained in the French-Spanish border town of Port Bou: after learning that new visa regulations now required a French exit visa, and faced with the prospect of arrest and deportation, Benjamin took the morphine pills he had been carrying with him since 1933. The next day, the rest of his party was given clearance to cross the border into Spain and, four days later, safely arrived in Lisbon. The knowledge that his escape was so nearly within his grasp – that any other route, decision, or contingency may have led to his survival – and yet remained fatally out of reach, makes counterfactual fantasies captivating and somehow genuinely conceivable, but they help us to forget that Benjamin did not escape Port Bou: he did not write a Los Angeles diary (as he did in Moscow, Ibiza, and Berlin) or sit in a pub in

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[6] John Schad, *The Late Walter Benjamin* (London: Continuum, 2012); David Kishik, *The Manhattan Project: A Theory of a City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 3.
[7] Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p. 216.

South Oxhey, or drop acid with Timothy Leary: Benjamin's life in the United States was a posthumous one.[8]

In this thesis, I suggest that key concepts in Benjamin's philosophy can be seen to 'survive' in the late novels of Markson, the poetry of Susan Howe, and Teju Cole's novel, *Open City*. Like Benjamin, Markson's project is concerned with the 'afterlife of works': his fractured, paratactic novels are inventories of anecdotes, quotations, and brief, intervening comments from their reclusive narrators. These novels testify to the survival of the works they cite, but Markson is also attentive to the process of destruction that creates the conditions for this survival. This process is reflected Markson's montage-like method and the fragmentary form of his work, but also testifies to the vicissitudes of time and the selectivity of cultural memory that threaten to condemn these works to oblivion. Susan Howe is similarly conscious of the fragile and contingent nature of a work's survival, but she places her focus on the afterlife of objects: books, ephemera, marginalia, and textiles – shirts, dresses, and bed hangings. In Howe's work, materiality is always an index to the immaterial: the material object traces – and is traced by – the corporeality, or life, of the people who once used or owned them. This conception of materiality is extrapolated to the level of language and poetry: just as the material object is a depository for the immaterial trace, so too is poetic language a register of something beyond its ability to fully articulate. Cole operates somewhere in between Markson's abstract fragments and Howe's interest in the material trace. The dialogue between Cole and Benjamin is mobilised in his novel, *Open City* (2011), through the figure of the *flâneur*, whose perambulatory vision uncovers the afterlife of colonial histories sedimented in the streets, skyscrapers, and monuments of New York City.

Schematically speaking, Markson examines the afterlife of works, Howe explores the material and linguistic manifestations of that afterlife, and Cole is interested in what we might call the spatio-temporal afterlives of history that are inscribed in the city. As I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, Markson, Cole, and Howe cross Benjamin's work at several other points of reference: not only the afterlife of works, but mortification, aura, allegory and the dialectical image. In doing so, these authors are not only attentive to the afterlife of works, but themselves constitute three of Benjamin's philosophical 'afterlives'. Though this dissertation does not seek to establish a traditional genealogy of influence

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[8] This point is not lost on Kishik: 'Rather than contest the reports about his death, he embraces this new solitary life, this posthumous existence, as if it were his personal resurrection', p. 3.

between Benjamin and the writers I have chosen to read alongside his thought, an examination of his belated reception in the United States parallels Benjamin's own model of history and will establish the coordinates of this study and help to situate it within the contexts of contemporary literary studies and Benjamin scholarship.

American Afterlife: Benjamin's U.S. Reception

Benjamin received scant critical recognition in the United States (and, indeed, his native Germany) during his lifetime and remained untranslated for over two decades.[9] A short review of *Origins of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*) appears in *Modern Language Review* in 1930; the same work is mentioned briefly by Gilbert Waterhouse in an issue of *German Studies* published during the same year. It was not until 1941 that Benjamin's work truly arrived in the United States, when Hannah Arendt crossed through Port Bou to New York and delivered his final essay, 'On the Concept of History' (1940) (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*) to Theodor Adorno, Benjamin's literary executor. In 1942, a volume of Adorno and Horkheimer's journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (mimeographed in Los Angeles) was dedicated to Walter Benjamin's memory, and included the essay in its appendix.[10] This marks Benjamin's official introduction to intellectual life in the United States, but his work would not be translated into English for well over two decades.[11] Until then, Benjamin's U.S. reception would remain appositely citational for a critic whose 'ideal was a book that would eliminate all commentary and consist in nothing but quotations.'[12] This citational reception began with notices of his death in journals like *The Jewish Refugee* and *The New Republic*. In 1944, Arendt translated the famous passage on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* from 'On the Concept of History' in her essay on Franz Kafka, published in *The Partisan Review*.[13] In 1945, Bertold Viertal, a student of Karl Krauss,

[9] See Peter Fenves, 'Benjamin's Early Reception in the U.S.', *Benjamin Studien*, 3, ed. by Daniel Weidner and Sigrid Weigel (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014), pp. 253-259. Fenves provides an invaluable and comprehensive overview of Benjamin's U.S. reception to which I am indebted.

[10] Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. by Michael Roberston (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), p. 311.

[11] 'Some Motifs on Baudelaire' was printed in the 1939/1940 issue of *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, but, as Fenves notes, 'there was no gesture toward an English translation.' Fenves, p. 254.

[12] Françoise Meltzer, 'Acedia and Melancholia', *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History,* ed. by Michael P. Steinberg (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 141-163 (p. 162). Meltzer also observes this feature of Benjamin scholarship, noting the capacious body of 'critical essays examining Benjamin's lack of professionalism (which is another way of reminding us that he never really "worked"), most of which centre around the failed *habilitation* thesis', p. 152.

[13] Hannah Arendt, 'Franz Kafka: A Revalution (on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of His Death)', *Partisan Review*, 11.4 (1944), pp. 412-422.

mentioned Benjamin's 'shock [*Chock*] effect' in an article on Brecht's dramaturgy in *The Kenyon Review*.[14] With the exception of Edward Landberg's English translation of 'What is Epic Theatre?' in *The Western Review* in 1948, Benjamin's presence on the critical landscape continued to be purely referential: Philip Rieff made a passing reference to Benjamin's concept of the aura in *World Politics* (1953); Michael Hamburger, known more recently for his acclaimed translations of W.G. Sebald's poetry, wrote an essay on Baudelaire for the first issue of *International Literary Annual* (1958), in which he acknowledges his indebtedness to Benjamin's own essay, 'Some Motifs on Baudelaire'; a year later, L. Stern included a quote from 'On the Concept of History' in his review of Herbert Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis*.[15] Finally, Susan Sontag makes multiple references to Benjamin in her 1966 essay collection *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*.[16]

By the late 1960s, the formation of Benjamin's image was well under way, aided by biographical portraits written by his friends. In 1965, Gershom Scholem delivered a lecture on Benjamin at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York; in 1967 Adorno's 'Portrait of Walter Benjamin' appeared in *Prisms*; and in 1968, Hannah Arendt published her own profile of Benjamin in *The New Yorker.* Although it is largely due to the assiduous efforts of Scholem, Adorno, and Arendt that Benjamin was belatedly introduced to the world, their portraits resulted in a myth that was not altogether favourable. While each critic clearly feels the acute loss of a friend whose thought enriched their own, all three present a 'barely controlled irritation' with Benjamin, who becomes the stage for articulating their political and philosophical commitments.[17] Scholem's lecture, which sets out to 'present a picture of his life and work', alternates between praise for Benjamin's 'masterly prose of rare incandescence' and disapproval of his 'weakness' for historical materialism for which his genius 'forsake[s] it very essence'.[18] In a review of *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, edited by both Scholem and Adorno, Fredric Jameson summarises Scholem's appraisal of

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[14] Fenves, p. 255. See Bertold Viertal, 'Bertolt Brecht, Dramatist', *The Kenyon Review*, 7 (1945), pp. 467-475.
[15] Ibid., p. 256. See Philip Rieff, 'Aesthetic Function in Modern Politics', *World Politics*, 5 (1953): pp 478-502; Michael Hamburger, 'Puerile Utopia and Brutal Mirage: Notes on Baudelaire and the History of a Dilemma', *International Literary Annual*, 1 (1958), pp. 135-152; L. Stern, 'Herbert Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism*', *Dissent*, 6 (1959), pp. 88-93.
[16] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 1966).
[17] Meltzer, p. 103.
[18] Gershom Scholem, 'Walter Benjamin', trans. by Lux Furtmüller, *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 10.1 (January 1965), pp. 117-136 (pp. 122-128).

Benjamin: 'the final decision not to emigrate to Palestine […] seems to have been as much as anything else the result of laziness (in learning Hebrew), incompetence (in sorting out his divorce) and sheer lack of ideological commitment.'[19] Adorno manages to make praise and opprobrium nearly indistinguishable when he claims Benjamin 'had nothing of the philosopher in the traditional sense […] [h]is own contribution to his work was not anything "vital" or "organic"; the metaphor of the creator is thoroughly inappropriate for him.'[20] He sees Benjamin's concept of 'dialectics at a standstill' not as a radically interruptive or potentially revolutionary concept, but 'petrified, frozen, or obsolete', a '*nature morte*'.[21] Of course, Benjamin, who after all described criticism as the 'mortification of the work' may not have disagreed with this assessment; but to emphasise the 'Medusan' 'glance of [Benjamin's] philosophy' not only 'subtly feminize[s] both him and his writing', but also renders it unfit for purpose, unable to stand up to the methodological rigour that marks 'serious' critics (such as Adorno himself).[22] In essence, Benjamin's personal and intellectual insufficiencies emerged when his work appeared at odds with that of his friends: for Adorno, Benjamin's theology contaminated his efforts at Marxist analysis; for Scholem, Benjamin's historical materialism tainted the theological aspects of his work and revealed his insufficient commitment to Zionism. Arendt's profile was more sympathetic. She thoroughly dispels the charges of Benjamin's laziness when she writes that '[w]hat strikes one as indecision […] as though he were vacillating between Zionism [Scholem] and Marxism [Adorno], in truth was probably due to the bitter insight that all solutions […] would lead him personally to a false salvation.'[23]

Like Scholem, Arendt also minimises Marx's (and, by implication, Adorno and Horkheimer's) relevance to Benjamin's work, controversially claiming Benjamin as a Heideggerian:

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[19] Fredric Jameson, 'An Unfinished Project', *London Review of Books,* 17.5 (August 1995), pp. 8-9 (p. 8). By Jeffrey Grossman's reckoning, Jameson's essays on Benjamin in the late 1960s and early 1970s were among the first to be written in English by someone who was not personally acquainted with him. See Grossman, 'The Reception of Walter Benjamin in the Anglo-American Literary Institution', *The German Quarterly*, 65.3-4 (Summer-Fall 1992), pp. 414-428 (p. 418).
[20] Theodor Adorno, 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin', *Prisms* trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981; repr. 1997), pp. 227-242 (p. 227).
[21] Adorno qtd. in Meltzer p. 145.
[22] Meltzer, p. 150. Meltzer adds that this 'gendering […] given the dominant masculinist culture, cannot fail to have its (negative) effects.' Ibid.
[23] Arendt, 'Introduction', *Illuminations* by Walter Benjamin, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (Fontana Press, 1973; repr. 1992), pp. 7-60 (p. 50).

Without realizing it, Benjamin actually had more in common with Heidegger's remarkable sense for living eyes and living bones that had been sea-changed into pearls and coral, and as such could be saved and lifted into the present only by doing violence to their context in interpreting them with 'the deadly impact' of new thoughts, than he did with the dialectical subtleties of his Marxist friends.[24]

Arendt does not pause to consider that one aspect of Benjamin's philosophical project was the intent to 'do violence' to Heidegger's thought, nor the violence in which Heidegger was complicit. In a letter from 1930, Benjamin informed Scholem that he and Brecht intended to set up a reading group and 'were planning to annihilate Heidegger here in the summer.'[25] Although she defends Benjamin from their charges of indecisiveness, this defence is only mounted in terms of his hesitancy to commit to either of their causes. Her reframing of Benjamin is accomplished by the same rhetorical flourish as Adorno and Scholem: by portraying Benjamin as a floundering incompetent unable to hold down a real job: 'Benjamin […] did not know the score. He never knew how to handle such things [as academic politics], was never able to move among such people […] Whenever he tried to adjust and be co-operative so as to get some firm ground under his feet somehow, things were sure to go wrong'.[26] Arendt reproduces Adorno's barbed praise: she writes that 'when he cared to define what he was doing', Benjamin considered himself a literary critic, that 'if he can be said at all to have aspired to a position in life, it would have been that of "the only true critic of German literature" (as Scholem put it in one of the few, very beautiful letters to the friend that have been published) except that the very notion of thus becoming a useful member of society would have repelled him.'[27] Arendt can claim Benjamin for Heidegger for the same

[24] Ibid.

[25] Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 365. Benjamin also distinguishes his philosophy of history, with its emphasis on the (dialectical) image, from the '"essences" of phenomenology.' *AP*, p. 462.

[26] Arendt, 'Introduction', p. 10. Lisa Fittko, who aided Benjamin and countless other refugees in their attempts to escape deportation and internment, casts him in a similar light: emphasising his inability to 'adapt', a man who 'could only take a hot cup [of tea] in his hand when he had first developed an appropriate theory.' Fittko qtd. in Michael Taussig, *Walter Benjamin's Grave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 10. See also Fittko, *Escape through the Pyrenees,* trans. by David Koblick (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1985).

[27] Arendt, 'Introduction', p. 4. The 'beautiful letter' to which Arendt refers is one in which Scholem demands Benjamin finally decide to move to Jerusalem or not, 'if only so that I do not find myself in an awkward position here […] I cannot continue, year after year, to maintain that you are on the verge of doing something, when in reality […] you will never actually do it.' He writes that Benjamin's intention to learn Hebrew 'appears exaggerated and wrong; nor does your presumptive position as the only true critic of German literature *require* the study of Hebrew. I hope these comments will force you to face up […]'. Gershom Scholem, letter to Benjamin, 20 February 1930, in *A Life in Letters, 1914-1982*, ed. and trans. by Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), p. 180.

reasons Adorno minimises the importance of Jewish mysticism and theology and for which Scholem dismisses Benjamin's dialectical materialism: Benjamin 'didn't know the score', he couldn't commit – his genius was misdirected; he misunderstood his own work. Interpreting Benjamin's work fell to the 'real' critics with serious convictions and rational methodologies. This collapse of Benjamin's texts and his person continues to the present day, wrapped up in detached counterfactuals where, were he 'practical' enough, he would have escaped from Europe. The most glaring example of this is a recent article in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* by Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, who unhelpfully points out that if Benjamin 'had carefully explored all the possible routes out of Nazi-occupied Europe in the late 1930s', he could have fled to Jaipur. Wurgaft goes on to list the reasons why Benjamin did not follow this belated advice: he was 'famously dissolute, usually out of work, a bad husband, a bad father, a bad friend, always in debt: he never seems to have been quite up to the challenges of adult life. It is easy to imagine Benjamin blaming his lot on his stars, rather than on his own actions or […] personal responsibility.'[28]

Arendt's profile of Benjamin for *The New Yorker* was repurposed for the introduction to *Illuminations*, the first collection of Benjamin's essays to be translated into English. It was published in 1968, coinciding with the global eruption of student protests, social movements, liberation struggles and the emergence of the New Left. The publication of *Illuminations* in the United States and the recirculation of his work elsewhere in Europe led to a rediscovery of his work by the student movements 'and became the works of a revolutionary critic of the "moment."'[29] This rediscovery also took place just as Adorno fell out of favour with his students over his views on direct action; around the same time, Arendt published *On Violence* (1969), where she made the bizarre remark on the 'curious tendency to yield more to Negro demands, even if they are clearly silly and outrageous'.[30] These extremely problematic approaches, framed as genuine disquiet towards violence, were at odds with the radical politics of their time (and are often elided in contemporary discussions of either critic). It is easy to see the appeal of Benjamin, who wrote in 1921 of the general

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[28] Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, 'Space Jew, or Walter Benjamin Among the Stars' *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 1 February 2016 <http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/space-jew-or-walter-benjamin-among-the-stars/> [accessed 7 March 2016].
[29] Bernd Kiefer, 'Crucial Moments, Crucial Points: Walter Benjamin and the Recognition of Modernity in Light of the Avant-garde', *European Avant Garde: New Perspectives*, ed. by Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam; Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 69-82 (p. 69).
[30] Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1969; repr. 1970), p. 19.

strike as 'a kind of revolutionary violence', to student protestors.[31] Of course, Benjamin was not alive to voice any unpalatable opinions on the contemporary moment, but at least he still believed in historical materialism. I am not attempting to demonise Benjamin's friends. Adorno, Arendt, and Scholem vigorously promoted Benjamin's writings and were crucial in bringing his work to Anglophone readers and across the Atlantic: Arendt uncovered his final essay and smuggled it out of Port Bou – without them Benjamin would not figure in the intellectual and cultural landscape as he does, if at all. What I wish to highlight is that the trajectory of Benjamin's reception gains momentum when the frameworks of his surviving colleagues become insufficient for approaching, describing, and interpreting their contemporary moment. At the same time, the revolutionary potential of the late 1960s and 1970 would remain largely unfulfilled by the New Left, although 'the openings provided by its decisive breaks with the established system leave a significant legacy.'[32]

As Jeffrey Grossman observes, with 'the rise of a form of intellectual radicalism in Europe and the United States in the 1960s, literature about Benjamin begins to appear with such rapidity that one might be tempted to view the situation as a Derridean *scene of writing* […] where writings and reiterations proliferate beyond human influence.'[33] Certainly, the critical interest in Benjamin skyrocketed in the 1960s and his writings, particularly those on surrealism and the work of art, became a fixture in the American academy, but the availability of Benjamin's translated texts was severely limited.[34] The first volume of his *Selected Writings* did not appear until 1996, and *The Arcades Project* was not published in

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[31] At least, to German students. 'Critique of Violence' was published in Germany in 1955. 'Critique' is almost certainly Benjamin's most controversial essay, and as many critics have taken issue with his concept of 'divine violence' as have defended it through careful exegesis. See 'Critique of Violence', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by various, 4 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996; repr. 2002), 1, pp. 236-252. Hereafter abbreviated to *SW* 1.

[32] George N. Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1987), p. 177. Katsiaficas sees the disappointments of the New Left as a global phenomenon: '[w]hether in the United States or Japan, Europe or Latin America, the New Left proved incapable of sustaining the momentum of the popular upsurge it helped to set into motion. As the radical impetus of 1968 was blunted and dispersed, written out of history books and caricatured in mass media and Hollywood, the New Left entered a period of crisis, a crisis brought on by the disintegration of a movement which had reached world-historical proportions. […] After the uprisings had died down […] the logic of the established system exerted a powerful influence in depoliticizing the counterculture and dispersing the New Left', ibid.

[33] Grossman, 'The Reception of Walter Benjamin in the Anglo-American Literary Institution', pp. 417-418.

[34] As Fenves notes, the following works were published in the United Kingdom in the mid- to late-1970s: *Charles Baudelaire* (1973), *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1977), *Reflections* (1978), *One-Way Street* (1979), and *Understanding Brecht* (1983). Of these, only *Origin of German Tragic Drama* and *Reflections* were published in the United States. Fenves writes: '[o]ne trait immediately distinguishes the works published in the States from those that were also available in Great Britain: the former can be seen as relatively neutral with respect to political questions, whereas the latter are decidedly oriented toward left-wing politics', p. 258.

English translation until 1999.[35] As before, excerpts from these untranslated works would appear in English only through citation. In the late 1970s, the first books to substantially engage with Benjamin's work appeared in the US: Jameson's *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (1974); Susan Buck-Morss's landmark *Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School* (1977) Carol Jacobs's *Dissimulating Harmony: Readings of Nietzsche, Artaud, Rilke, and Benjamin* (1978).[36] But it is in the 1990s that the 'Benjamin boom', as Noah Isenberg calls it, began in earnest. The fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1990 and the celebration of his centennial birthday occasioned new appraisals of his work, retrospective conferences, and special issues of journals devoted to the critic.[37] This coincided with the publication of the first three English-language volumes of his *Selected Writings* in 1996 and the translation of *The Arcades Project*, which only appeared in English in 1999. From this point on, Benjamin ceases to be the 'loser son' (to borrow Avital Ronell's ironic designation) of critical theory, an image imprinted by the early biographical portraits, and comes to be seen as a melancholic drifter born under the sign of Saturn, the 'Last Intellectual', a prophet of late capitalism and postmodernity.[38] As Sándor Radnóti writes, '[o]vernight [Benjamin's] life work fell under a penetrating light – a light which in a Benjaminian spirit might be called a redeeming light – taken up […] by the most varied schools of thought'.[39]

Of course, in noting the distortion of Benjamin's image, one risks going in the other direction: hagiography, or what might today be called a 'brand', one which is just as guilty of collapsing the person and his thought as Wurgaft does. An uncritical defence of Benjamin poses the grave risk of flattening the complexities and contradictions of his work in order to present a programmatic philosophy. For instance, although I do not believe Benjamin to be

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[35] See Uwe Steiner, 'Posthumous Influence and Stages of Reception', *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to His Work*, trans. by Michael Winkler (London; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 174-184.
[36] Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); Susan Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School* (New York; London: Collier Macmillan, 1977); Carol Jacobs, *Dissimulating Harmony: Readings of Nietzsche, Artaud, Rilke, and Benjamin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).
[37] Noah Isenberg, 'The Work of Walter Benjamin in the Age of Information', *New German Critique*, 93 (Spring-Summer 2001), pp. 119-150 (p. 121).
[38] Avital Ronell, *Loser Sons: Politics and Authority* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Susan Sontag, 'The Last Intellectual', *New York Review of Books*, 12 October 1978 <www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/10/12/the-last-intellectual/> [accessed 12 May 2018]. This essay on Benjamin was published as 'Under the Sign of Saturn' in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York; London: Penguin, 1972; repr. 2009), pp. 109-136.
[39] Sándor Radnóti, 'Benjamin's Dialectic of Art and Society', *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. by Gary Smith (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1983; repr. 1989), pp. 126-157 (p. 126).

as undialectical as Adorno lets on, any attempt to show that Benjamin's idiosyncratic dialectics were in strict accord with that of Marx would be futile. This strategy is succinctly described by Gerhard Richter as the 'assimilat[ion] [of] Benjamin's texts mimetically into this or that ideology.'[40] Grossman takes this further, asserting that Benjamin now functions allegorically, 'as [a] sign which various discourses attempt to rewrite according to their own model'.[41] Benjamin is not a saint to be worshipped. And yet, there is something compelling about Scholem's statement, written in 1972, that '[a]mong the peculiarities of Benjamin's philosophical prose […] is its enormous suitability for *canonization*; I might almost say for quotation as a kind of Holy Writ.'[42] Compelling, because it is relevant to both Benjamin's privileged, interrelated concepts of citation and translation (which I will discuss presently), and because it sheds some light on the reception history of Benjamin I have begun to outline.

First, we should note that in Scholem's formulation, it is the 'prose', not the person, which lends itself to 'canonization' (in both the literary and theological connotations). More importantly, canonization and quotation are ('almost') interchangeable, just as Benjamin's prose is at once 'rational and mystical'.[43] And yet, the 'suitability for canonization' leads Scholem to quotation, an intervening form that, as Benjamin tells us, subverts the authority that it appears to appeal to. To cite something is both to call on its source and to destroy it, similar to Hegel's *Aufgehoben*, lifting the quotation not-too-gently from its original context and re-placing it in an/other configuration by freeing the quotation from the confines of one text and resituating it in another, which is to say by 'wrenching' the past into the present. For Benjamin, citation has the force of divine violence:

> In the quotation that both saves and punishes, language proves the matrix of justice. It summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin. It appears […] in the structure of a new text. […] it gathers the similar into its aura; as name, it stands alone and expressionless. In citation the two realms – of origin and destruction – justify themselves before language. And conversely, only where they interpenetrate – in citation – is language

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[40] Gerhard Richter, 'Introduction: Benjamin's Ghosts', *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 1-22 (p. 8).
[41] Grossman, p. 414.
[42] Scholem, 'Walter Benjamin and His Angel', *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, ed. by Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken Books, 1976; repr. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2012), pp. 198-236 (p. 198). My emphasis.
[43] Ibid.

consummated. In it is mirrored the angelic tongue in which all words, startled from the idyllic context of meaning, have become mottoes in the book of Creation.[44]

Citation has 'the power not to preserve but to purify, to tear from context, to destroy; the only power in which hope still resides that something might survive this age – because it was wrenched from it'.[45] But this 'destructive element' is directed toward the fixating, reifying force of history and in this way, is also a form of recovery. If the continuum of history is not 'blasted open – if its discrete fragments are not dislodged from their authorizing context, then its content is lost in the Heraclitean flow of history. At first glance, the act of ripping a quotation from its context only to install it within another one may seem to be an act of repetition. If we take Scholem at his word and contend that, for better or for worse, Benjamin's writing lends itself 'to quotation as a kind of Holy Writ', we must recognise that even the seemingly unquestionable authority of Holy Writ was subject to interlinear translation, juxtaposing the original script with a vernacular in an arrangement that radically transforms each language. The Benjamin 'contest' between critics – where one version is pitted against another, each claiming to be the 'true' interpretation of his philosophy – fails to recognise that a single version of a work does not exist. The point of the 'truth' – whether historical, materialist, or theological – is that it cannot be 'held fast' or for long, it 'flits by'. How, indeed, could a 'true image of the past' remain eternal as long as time (by nature ephemeral and transient) is constantly in motion, each subsequent event modifying the view of past and present occurrences? As Benjamin writes, 'to write history is to cite history', and the historian (and the critic) must make a choice, even if it is inadvertent, whether to invoke the authority of its sources or to call them to account as and in citation(s).[46] The goal of citation, like that of translation, is transformation, rather than the reduplication, of language in history and of history. In this study, I do not consider Benjamin's philosophy as an inviolable authority fixed to its historical context but allow it to 'come into [its] own' afterlife 'by making use of it'.[47]

Benjamin's eminent ability *to cite* and the eminent *citability* of his own texts is epitomised in *The Arcades Project*, unavailable in English until 1999 but quoted far earlier

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[44] 'Karl Kraus', *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al, 4 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2:2, pp 433-458 (p. 455). Hereafter *SW* 2:2.
[45] Ibid.
[46] *AP*, [N11,3], p. 476.
[47] Ibid., [N1a,8], p. 460.

in secondary literature. If this citability is anything to go by, it can be concluded that Benjamin's work also possesses an inherent translatability, defined in 'The Task of the Translator' as 'an essential quality' reserved for 'certain works'.[48] This citability and translatability designate the potential for Benjamin's work to acquire new iterations, to exist apart and away from itself in other contexts: these are the conditions for the afterlife as Benjamin conceives it.

Afterlife (*Nachleben*)

Benjamin first introduces the term 'afterlife', or *Nachleben,* in his 1923 essay, 'The Task of the Translator' (*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers).* A translation (*Übersetzen),* is that which crosses over from the life of the original into its afterlife; as Esther Leslie writes, 'its renewal through its existence in another language, another epoch'.[49] In what follows, I do not provide a Bloomian account of influence, but instead seek to establish establish points of contact between Benjamin's figures of thought and the works of three authors who emerge 'after' him. A traditional model of influence posits a debt of fidelity between authors past and present and assumes the unbroken continuity of this or that tradition. Such a model minimises more resonant and intractable forms of relation. As this thesis is underpinned by Benjamin's philosophy of history, Bloom's historicist model of influence (and its Oedipal anxieties) is antithetical to my project. If one extrapolates from Benjamin's theory of history (if it can be called a 'theory': Benjamin does not present unified concepts), a 'Benjaminian' notion of literary influence would be characterised not by genealogical lines of continuity, but by the sudden flashes of relation between objects that were once thought be disconnected. Furthermore, such a strategy would doubtless fail to establish an intentional genealogy between a German philosopher and three very different American authors writing in English. Instead, I propose an alternate model based on Benjamin's account of translation, which emphasises the radical disjunction between original and translation. Benjamin writes:

It is evident that no translation […] can have any significance as regards the original. Nonetheless, it does stand in the closest relationship to the original by virtue of the original's translatability; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of

[48] Benjamin, 'Task of the Translator', *SW* 1, pp. 253-263 (p. 263). Further references indicated by 'Task' and page number.
[49] Leslie, p. 46. I will use my reading of Markson's work to provide a fuller analysis of the concept of afterlife in Chapter 1.

importance to the original. We may call this connection a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital one. Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original – no so much from its life as from its afterlife.[50]

A translation owes the original no fidelity; that is, it does not – cannot – exactly resemble or photographically reproduce the original. As usual in Benjamin's writing, the term he discusses, 'translation', is released from the constraints of its standard definition: for instance, Benjamin is quick to dismiss translation as the conversion of information from one language into another. Because the totality of the original in its cultural and linguistic specificity cannot be preserved in the target language, the translation cannot reproduce the original. A sentence, held together by its unique syntax, grammar, and connotations, does not survive in translation, and indeed it must be dismantled, deformed, and often even reimagined for a translation to occur.

It is at this point in the essay that Benjamin makes the distinction between 'what is meant and the way of meaning it' by using the example of *Bröt* and *pain*, the French and German words for 'bread'. In both words, 'what is meant is the same' – they refer to the same object; but the 'way of meaning', that is, the languages in which each word is expressed, are not identical: 'in fact, they strive to exclude each other.'

The translator's 'task' thus exposes the irreconcilable difference (which begins to look like *différance*) not only between two languages, but between language and thought.[51] In translation, the original can no longer rely on the untranslatable idiom, and through this it is revealed that all language gestures toward – or cites – something that cannot be fully expressed within it. Put another way, by transfiguring one language into another, a translation calls attention to the language itself as a mere 'figure' of divine speech; language is the mediated, unfulfilled promise of the immediate, unmediated communication that Benjamin calls 'pure language' toward which all languages aspire.[52] The 'weak messianism' or redemptive potential of translation is its ability to, at least briefly, overcome the Babelian

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[50] Benjamin 'Task', p. 254.

[51] Beatrice Hanssen beautifully explores conceptual points of contact between Benjamin and Derrida in *Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Angels, Animals and Human Beings* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1998; repr. 2000).

[52] The notion of 'pure language' derives from Benjamin's earlier essay, 'On the Language of Man and on Language as Such' (1916), where he contrasts the prelapsarian form of communication with the fallen 'language of man'. I address Benjamin's theological concept of language in Chapter 2. See *SW* 1, pp. 62-74.

confusion between languages by revealing their 'innermost relationship', their 'special kinship' by representing 'their interrelate[ion] in what they want to express.'[53] The true significance of translation is that it reveals the intention of language (as such) toward (but never fully obtaining) transcendent expression, seeking to bridge the gap between what is meant and the way of meaning. In poststructuralist terms, translation both confronts and enacts the split between 'signifier' and 'signified'. For Benjamin, this split is the defining distinction between fallen, human language, and the divine Word – and makes discrete, individual languages 'recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel' by 'incorporating the original's *way of meaning*'.[54] Many commentaries on Benjamin's translation essay emphasise the destructive element of translation, and indeed translation can be thought of as the destruction of the original's syntactical unity, but it is not an absolute or vengeful form of destruction; rather, the translated form is what survives the original in the process of translation which issues the afterlife of the original.[55] Accordingly, although translation involves destruction, the '*intentio*' of translation is survival, the irreducible kernel of the original that can only be drawn out by a transformation of both the source language and the target language. The texts I have chosen to examine each incorporate Benjamin's way[s] of meaning', and thus can be considered 'translations' insofar as they issue from, and constitute, an afterlife of his works in 'another language' and 'another epoch'.[56]

Chapter 1: Mortification of the Work: David Markson, Benjamin, and the Novel

In Chapter 1, I read David Markson's 'notecard quartet' – *Reader's Block* (1996), *This is Not a Novel* (2001), *Vanishing Point* (2004), and *The Last Novel* (2007) – in conversation with Benjamin's concept of afterlife, which designates a form of survival beyond the origin, obsolescence, and/or destruction of a text. In this first chapter, I chart the development of citation in Markson's work as it attempts to link disparate historical moments through the disjunctive form of the fragment. Markson's novels are often inadvertently minimised as the 'tragic anecdotes [through which] we unexpectedly discern the entire shape of a man's life',

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[53] 'Task', p. 255. Benjamin's most resonant remarks on weak messianism can be found in 'On the Concept of History', *Selected Writings,* trans. by Edmund Jephcott et al, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4, pp. 389-411 (p. 390). Hereafter abbreviated to *SW* 4. Subsequent references to this essay will be shortened to 'On the Concept'.
[54] 'Task', p. 260. My emphasis.
[55] For example, see Paul de Man's essay, 'Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"' in *The Resistance to Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 73-105.
[56] Leslie, p. 46.

but I seek to prove that there is something much more complex and philosophical about his work than its reception tends to suggest.[57] Markson's deployment of categories such as the fragment, the anecdote, and the caesura reject such claims that his late work is a cozy but life-affirming book of trivia. While the novels are indeed filled with a profusion of interesting facts, Markson wrenches them from their context, separates them from their sources, and allows them to 'come into their own' as the multiplicity of counterpoised presents that defy a linear continuum of history. The repetition of themes within these anecdotes draws out a common texture between each present, wherein each of these instances are united; yet the discontinuous structure of the novels, in which one relation dissolves into another, ensures that these moments are transient rather than timeless or eternal, and therefore resolutely historical in the sense Benjamin inheres.

The anecdote, a citational form related to but distinct from quotation, is also of paramount importance in Markson's novels. Most of these anecdotes refer to illness, penury, and death, repetitiously linking the *work* of art to creaturely vulnerability. I quote a few examples from *Reader's Block* by way of illustration: 'Jack London committed suicide'; 'Bruno Schulz was carrying home a loaf of bread when he was shot down in the street by the Gestapo'; 'Mussorgsky died raving mad from drink'; 'Cosimo Tura died in a poorhouse.'[58] Anecdotes about death are anecdotes of the most intense kind: originating from the Greek *an-* 'not' and *ekdotos* 'published' (from *ek-* 'out' and *didonai* 'to give'), the anecdote cannot exist until 'after the fact' – it is, like citation and translation, a belated, very often posthumous form. In the translation essay, Benjamin writes that 'the idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity'.[59] This is not a matter of animating dead objects with life (fetishisation) but, as Christopher Bush lucidly describes, of 'understand[ing] textuality and organic life in relation to a more general process of living on, the general afterliving that is history'.[60] Benjamin describes works of art as belonging to the realm of 'linguistic creation', intimately related to the artist as a trace of them having been alive, but also separate from them.[61] In Markson's novels, this relationship is articulated through formal fragmentation and anecdotes which seem to

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[57] Markson, David. *The Last Novel*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2007), back matter, n.p. Hereafter abbreviated to *LN*.
[58] *RB*.
[59] 'Task', p. 254.
[60] Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 89.
[61] 'Task', p. 254.

'speak' to one another.

Chapter 2: Dialectic of the Valance: Aura, Trace, and Allegory in the Poetry of Susan Howe

Throughout the last two decades, many scholars have made observations about the similarity between Susan Howe's poetry and the philosophical writings of Walter Benjamin. With the notable exceptions of Rachel Tzvia Back and Mandy Bloomfield, however, there are very few sustained analyses of the ways in which Howe's work can be seen to interact with that of Benjamin.[62] Each of these studies elegantly notes the resonance between Howe's paratactic poems and Benjamin's dialectical image. In *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (2002) Back sees Howe's lyric interventions in the established history of the United States as enacting Benjamin's exhortation in 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' to 'brush history against the grain'. Howe's attempts to grasp at 'shared memories […] through myth, fantasy, and first landscapes' as a way of 'articulat[ing] the past historically […] to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger'.[63] In other words, Back regards Howe's poems as dialectical images which 'are at every moment in danger of being lost'.[64] Back draws on Howe's work from the early 1980s – *The Libertines* (1980) and *Pythagorean Silence* (1982) while Bloomfield focuses on *Singularities* (1990). Bloomfield's lucid work, *Archaeopoetics: Word, Image, History* draws heavily on Benjamin's concept of history and also includes a chapter on Howe.[65] Paul Naylor's 1995 article, 'Writing History Poetically', likewise compares Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image to Howe's poetic configurations of history, calling attention to a line in *Thorow*, 'this/ present in the Past now', as an articulation of *Jetztzeit* ('now-time') after the fact.[66] Likewise, Susan Barbour's analysis of *The Midnight* briefly refers to the work

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[62] Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (Tuscaloosa; London: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Mandy Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2016).
[63] Back, p. 67; Benjamin, 'On the Concept', p. 390.
[64] Benjamin, ibid.
[65] Mandy Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics,* pp. 38-73. Bloomfield also devotes her considerable skill to chapters on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Maggie O'Sullivan, Kamau Brathwaite, and M. NourbeSe Philip. Bloomfield coins the term 'archaeopoetics' to describe poetic texts, such as Howe's, whose formal and methodological concerns are shaped by the practice of archaeology. Bloomfield cites the fragment, 'Excavation and Memory', in which Benjamin writes that '[h]e who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging'. Benjamin qtd. in Bloomfield, p. 18. As 'digging' suggests, Bloomfield emphasises, by way of Benjamin, the tangible, material aspect of history and historical objects, calling attention to the tactile, embodied particularities of 'brush[ing] history against the grain.'
[66] Paul Naylor, 'Writing History Poetically: Walter Benjamin and Susan Howe', *Genre*, 28.3 (Fall 1995), pp. 323-338. Naylor has re-worked much of this article into a more recent publication, *Poetic Investigations:*

itself as 'a caesura-image' in its montage-like use of juxtaposing photographs, text, and photocopies.[67] Barbour also draws attention to Howe's fascination with the dash or hyphen as a 'hush of hesitation' from which she insightfully draws a comparison to Benjamin's description of the dialectical image as 'the caesura in the movement of thought'.[68]

Howe has certainly read Benjamin, and in an interview with Lynn Keller expresses her admiration for 'his interest in the fragment, the material object, and the entrance of the messianic into the material object.'[69] The material object that features most prominently in Howe's work is the book, specifically the written word which lies within its pages and which has the potential to – weakly, as an echo, as an afterlife – reanimate the voices of the dead, particularly marginalised voices which have been figuratively 'put to death' by the archive and the literary canon. Not only textiles, but texts provide the 'relational space' within which 'poetry telepathy' occurs, a phrase I examine at length in this chapter.[70] It is this attention to the 'dark side of history' that makes Howe's work so resonant with Benjamin's. Howe's poesis is driven by the materiality of artefacts from the past: a scrap of Sarah Pierpont Edwards' wedding dress, her mother's handmade bookmarks, Emily Dickinson's hand sewn fascicles – become so saturated with materiality that the poet's contemplation of these objects tips into the immaterial. This, I want to argue, is the point where the aura, the cult or exhibition value of the artwork that Benjamin sees as endangered by technical reproducibility, acquires its afterlife through obsolete technologies.

In both Howe's and Benjamin's accounts, language is severed from its ties to a transcendent and 'pure' meaning exemplified by edenic, pre-lapsarian communication between God and man found in the Book of Genesis. For Benjamin, this schism between word and meaning is allegorised by the story of Babel; for Howe, Babel occurs in the Massachusetts Bay Colony when Anne Hutchinson fatefully distinguishes between external 'expression' and internal 'judgement'. Accused by the colony's governor, John Winthrop, and other minister-magistrates of a schismatic heresy, Hutchinson was banished from

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Singing the Holes in History (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999). See especially 'Introduction' and Chapter 2. As of the writing of this thesis, I have been unable to access the original article, which is no longer held (in physical or digital form) by Duke University Press.

[67] Susan Barbour, '"Spiritual Hyphen": Bibliography and Elegy in Susan Howe's *The Midnight*', *Textual Practice,* 25.1 (2011), pp. 133-155.

[68] Ibid., pp. 136-137.

[69] Susan Howe interviewed by Lynn Keller, *Contemporary Literature,* 34.1 (Spring 1995), pp. 1-34 (p. 29).

[70] *The Midnight*, p. 57; *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, (New York: New Directions, 1989; repr. 1993), p. 116.

Boston, cast out from the church, and fled to Long Island where she was later murdered in a raid. By insisting on the separation of word and meaning, Hutchinson challenged the social order of her community. As Caldwell's pivotal article puts it, Hutchinson 'turn[ed] the city on a hill into a tower of Babel'.[71] In both cases, language can only imperfectly cite its meaning, leading to an overwhelming proliferation of meanings and definitions attached to single words. In this sense, all language is 'allegorical' in the etymological sense of 'speaking otherwise'. From this intersection of language, image, and theology, one arrives at allegory, a point to which I return in the second half of this chapter with particular reference to *The Midnight*.

Chapter 3: *Trompe-l'oeil*: Reframing Perspective in Teju Cole's *Open City*

My final chapter focuses on Teju Cole's 2011 novel, *Open City*. Upon its publication, *Open City* garnered praise from critics that focused not so much on its actual content, but on its resemblance to the prose of W.G. Sebald, an author marked through-and-through by Benjamin's philosophy of history; it was also upheld as an exemplar of the cosmopolitan novel and the post-9/11 novel.[72] I begin this chapter by addressing these affiliations and how they mediate the Benjaminian aspects of Cole's novel, which is set in post-9/11 New York and registers the absence of the Twin Towers as 'a metonym of its disaster'.[73] Instead of affirming *Open City*'s incarnation of these genres, I suggest the following: that Cole's novel is, in fact, a critique of these genres, which are placed within largely liberal discourses. I argue that Cole mounts this critique through acts of literary and generic anamorphosis. Anamorphosis is a painterly technique that reached its nadir during the baroque period, which Cole is intimately acquainted with, having been an art historian before becoming a novelist and photographer. Like Benjamin, Sebald has become a 'key' or a 'sign' in or under which one might authentically compose the highly-contingent, loss-filled history of modernity. I identify the point of Cole's convergence with Benjamin to be the category of nature-history or natural history (*Naturgeschichte*), which, Eric Santner writes, 'refers […] not to the fact that nature also has a history but to the fact that the artefacts of human history

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[71] Patricia Caldwell, 'The Antinomian Language Controversy', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 69.3/4 (Jul-Oct 1976), pp. 345-367 (p. 342). See also David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

[72] To my knowledge, Karen Jacobs is the only literary critic to have explored Cole's and Sebald's literary relationship in detail. See Jacobs, 'Teju Cole's Photographic Afterimages', *Image & Narrative,* 15.2 (2014), pp. 87-10.

[73] *OC*, p. 52.

tend to acquire an aspect of mute, natural being at the point where they begin to lose their place in a viable form of life.'[74] The outlook of natural history is exemplified in the baroque *Trauerspiel*, where ruins and death's heads signify the bloody pageant of history as a natural, and therefore unstoppable, catastrophe. In *Open City*, as in Sebald's novels, this manifests as an acute attention to the mute, oppressed and repressed historical afterlives that emanate from monuments, buildings, and landscapes. A scene from *Open City* that illustrates this yoking of nature and history occurs when the protagonist visits Bruges. Walking through the Parc du Cinqauntenaire to his hotel, Julius is caught in a rain storm:

> [The rain] fell on the bronze head of Leopold II at his monument, on Claudel at his, on the flagstones of the Palais Royal. The rain kept coming down, on the battlefield of Waterloo at the outskirts of the city, the Lion's Mound, the Ardennes, the implacable valleys full of young men's bones grown old, on the preserved cities farther out west, on Ypres and the huddled white crosses dotting Flanders fields, the turbulent channel, the impossibly cold sea to the north, on Denmark, France, and Germany.[75]

Using a storm to signify the force and transience of history is bound to recall Benjamin's famous thesis on Klee's angel, a witness caught between the irrevocable pastness of history and the inevitability of the future. Much of the discussion surrounding Sebald and Cole focuses on legal and traumatic models of the witness, the possibility of ethically witnessing atrocity, and the potential forms this might take. For Sebald, witnessing historical trauma results in the secondary trauma of the witnessing represented in the angel's open-mouthed gaze. There are very clear problems with this notion of the witness as it is articulated in Sebald, where the witness is also situated within the role of the tourist. Like Sebald's protagonists, the narrator of *Open City* is a *flâneur*, a figure whose destructive qualities are often left by the wayside in favour of a more liberatory, subversive figure of modernism. By joining the figure of the *flâneur*, the witness, and natural history together, *Open City* explores the limits of a certain interpretation of Benjamin's concept of history, the very interpretation that led critics to favourably compare Cole to Sebald.

Despite Julius' incomparable historical insights, to which I will pay close attention, he is fatally unwilling to recognise the act of sexual violence committed against Moji, the sister of his boyhood friend. This fact is withheld from the reader and repressed by the narrator

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[74] Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), p. 17.
[75] *OC*, p. 146.

until the final chapters of the novel. It is also an element of the novel which is often elided by or insubstantially addressed by critics. I will discuss some of the ways critics have grappled with the fact of rape in *Open City*, which tend to attribute some sort of psychological portrait of the protagonist in order to better assimilate it into a coherent literary analysis. Put another way: readers first encounter Julius as a melancholic, intellectual cosmopolitan with an intricately ethical way of interpreting the world, seemingly offering an updated version of Sebaldian history adequate for the era that has seen the repercussions of the so-called War on Terror. However, this view gives little credit to Cole, underestimating his skill as a writer and thinker. In terms which will be elucidated in this chapter, the *Trauerspiel*, or mourning-play, represents a deformation of the classic structure of tragedy, in which the tragic hero recognises the truth of his situation and his own character. The mourning play, on the contrary, presents the world and its players as mere spectators, denied revelation or self-recognition.

In the novel's epigraph, Cole writes, 'Death is a perfection of the eye', a phrase I view as key to understanding *Open City*.[76] Julius is first presented as having an acute visual sense, able to see beneath the commercial veneer of Manhattan and, as a psychiatrist, we expect him to be self-aware, capable of insight into the human psyche. Yet he is ultimately unable to relate to others, and only half-heartedly attempts to reconcile with his estranged family. This line of enquiry will lead me to back to Benjamin's discussion of *Trauerspiel*. Throughout the novel, Julius often doubts his own vision: when he finds himself in Wall Street Station, he 'suspect[s] for a moment that the grand hall […] was a trick of the eye'. Julius perceives the grand station hall as if it were an optical illusion, a *trompe-l'oeil*. This passage, I argue in the chapter, is pivotal, because it describes the novel itself. I read *Open City* as a 'trompe-l'oeil': only from a peculiar, singular, and even unnatural vantage point can the viewer see the skull in its legible dimension. While at first glance the epigraph may seem overtly obscure or merely ornamental, in *Open City*, as in *The Ambassadors*, the conditions of such legibility are predicated on reading the encoded configuration of an image that can be recognized only at a specific moment – and only from a distorted perspective.

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[76] Ibid., n.p.

Chapter One

Mortification of the Work: David Markson, Benjamin, and the Novel

> Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage. […] Obstinately cross-referential and of cryptic interconnective syntax.
>
> – David Markson, *This is Not a Novel*[1]
>
> Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.
>
> – Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*[2]

These epigraphs demonstrate the intuition behind this chapter: the striking resemblance between the late novels of David Markson – *Reader's Block* (1996), *This is Not a Novel* (2001), *Vanishing Point* (2004), and *The Last Novel* (2007) – and Walter Benjamin's unfinished magnum opus, *The Arcades Project*. Placed side by side, these quotations, both comments on the construction of idiosyncratic works, pose an affinity between the two writers' formal methods. In what follows, I do not presume to collapse Benjamin's prehistory of modernity with Markson's de facto postmodern work. Instead, I intend to gather a constellation of concepts that chart four theoretical points of connection between Benjamin and Markson: the fragment, citation, afterlife (*Nachleben*), and mortification. Benjamin thus becomes a lens through which to understand Markson's cryptic insights into the history of the work of art. It is in this sense that I read Markson's late oeuvre as an 'afterlife' of Benjamin's own writings.

Drawing on Benjamin's notion of the 'afterlife of works' and 'mortification of the works', I argue that Markson's texts are an instantiation of a dialectic of the fragment that is implicit in the work of both the philosopher and the author. The terms 'afterlife' and 'mortification' appear to be antithetical, and yet, as I hope to make clear, are in fact facets of Benjamin's 'Janus-faced' thought. A fragment signifies destruction and survival, and as such is a locus of mortification and afterlife. In what follows, I trace the various connotations of the fragment – as a literary form, as an object, and as a verb: 'to fragment' – as it appears

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[1] Markson, *This Is Not a Novel* (London: CB Editions, 2001), p. 11. Hereafter cited as *NN*.
[2] Benjamin, *AP*, [N1a,8], p. 8.

in and shapes Markson's late novels. Next, I explore the significance of Benjamin's use of quotation, which is itself another kind of fragmentation that oscillates between memorialisation and the juridical meaning of citation – a calling to account. I argue that while Markson uses fragments of other texts to form his novels, he also actively 'fragments', or, following Benjamin, 'mortifies' the novel form. This act of mortification allows Markson to offer up a critique of the novel as such; in doing so, his own novel becomes an afterlife of the novel, showing what 'lives on' or survives after the most conventional elements of the traditional novel (plot, setting, character) are ruptured. The relevance of Benjamin's theory of history to literature – and of literature to history – cannot be overstated. Not only is the dialectical image a figure like that of a word or a hieroglyph that must be read, but the interrelation of 'what has been' to 'the now' 'bears to the highest degree the imprint of the […] moment on which *all reading is founded*.'[3] The foundation of Benjamin's concept of history is also the foundation of reading itself, both of which are predicated on legibility, recognisability, and a peculiar temporal relationality whereby the present follows (after) and is followed (after) by the past. The model of this temporality is not one of continuity, but of the fragment and its disrupted network of relation. The fragments of time that Markson presents on the page are given the same shape: it is initially unclear how they relate to one another, and it takes several pages for one discrete sentence to 'form a constellation' with the sentences that follow it.

The relationship between Benjamin and Markson is not one of traditional, explicit influence, but rather a kind of 'elective affinity'. Markson, an omnivorous and obsessive reader, was certainly familiar with Benjamin, but no more so than he was with Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Wittgenstein, and so on. The problem with pinning down a single model for Markson's work is immediately evident to any reader of his novels, which reference thousands of writers, philosophers, artists and musicians. But while a Bloomian model of influence is untenable when it comes to Benjamin and Markson, the intersections of their intellectual paths are impossible to ignore: just as Benjamin defines the method of *The Arcades Project* by emphasising presentation ('merely show', 'making use of') and construction ('literary montage') over commentary ('I needn't *say* anything') and exegesis ('no ingenious formulations'), Markson likewise stresses his novels' 'nonlinear', 'discontinuous' structure, privileging a collection ('assemblage') of discrete fragments

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[3] *AP*, [N3,1], p. 463.

('collage-like') whose relations are 'cross-referential' and 'interconnective' over a traditionally progressive, plot-driven narrative.

Without commentary or linear narrative, what remains is the fragment. Consequently, Benjamin's *Arcades* (and his final essay, 'On the Concept of History') and Markson's late novels take on a fragmentary form. This form similarly reflects the materials Benjamin and Markson 'make use of': quotations, anecdotes, and brief but resonant interpolations by the author(s). By creating a text composed solely of fragments – of remnants – Markson is able to reveal that when narrative is stripped away to its bare material, composed 'merely' of fragments, what is left between them is a collection of blank spaces between the lines, of gaps, and a sense of incompletion – an index that can only refer to itself. The titles of his late novels are significant in this regard. Markson's first 'late' novel, *Reader's Block* displaces the creative 'blocks' of the author by the suggestion of a limited, obstructed insight of the reader. The experimental (but by no means originary) organisation of the novel is skeletal in two senses, as the printed text is broken up by noticeable 'blocks' of white spaces between fragments which compulsively refer to death, illness, and waste. Without traditional narrative devices or substantive commentary linking each fragment in sequence, the reader is indeed 'blocked' at every turn from cognising the linear narrative that turning the numbered pages seems to demand. The title of Markson's third late novel, *Vanishing Point*, also suggests an infinite but obscured perspective faced by the reader when confronted with the fragment.

In addition to fragmentary form and fragmented content, there is also the matter of a fragmented but highly disciplined organisation. In this sense, Markson also shares Benjamin's compositional technique. During his forays into the Bibliothéque Nationale, Benjamin would 'organise […] thousands of index cards on which he transcribed quotations and notations into files, called *Konvolute*. He developed a system of cross-referencing. The files comprised a vast array of interlinked scraps'.[4] Compare this to Markson's description of his own method: 'I use index cards. I store them in the tops of a couple of shoe boxes. If I made a stack of them, they'd probably be about two feet tall. I'm constantly shuffling'.[5] In an interview with Laura Sims, Markson describes this process in further detail:

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[4] Esther Leslie, 'Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*', *Militant Esthetix,*
<www.militantesthetix.co.uk/waltbenj/yardcades.html> [accessed 1 January 2017].
[5] Markson interviewed by Tayt Harlin, 'Interview with David Markson', *Conjunctions*, 28 April 2007,
<www.conjunctions.com/webcon/harlinmarkson07.htm> [accessed 5 May 2015].

All my life I've been an inveterate checker-off-in-the-margins, but in recent years, writing *Reader's Block* and the rest, I simply began to copy out the stuff that interested me instead. And where better than on three-by-five cards? […] I file them one behind the other, in tops of shoe boxes, ultimately two of those taped end-to-end. […] I'm shuffling and rearranging repeatedly […][6]

When asked about the ordering of the cards, their placement in the novels, and the element of chance, Markson responded:

Of course [their placement is sometimes random]. There are hundreds of things that I find intrinsically interesting, or that echo different themes, but which have to simply fall where they may. Nonetheless […] those other placements are all generally more intricate and interconnected than I've indicated, and often pretty subtle. […] Kurt Vonnegut called me. 'David, what sort of computer did you use to juggle all that stuff?' I had to tell him I didn't own one - I still don't, incidentally - and that it all came out of my aging and rapidly deteriorating brain. Plus of course those ubiquitous index cards.[7]

I quote from these interviews at length to outline the key elements of Markson's novels. First, the importance of the index-card method, which 'shuffles' between intentional, premeditated order and aleatory chaos. This is very much the dialectic uncovered by Benjamin's 1931 essay, 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Collecting', where he writes 'the life of the collector manifests a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order'.[8] Benjamin begins this essay by describing the partially furnished flat he occupied following his separation from his wife, Dora; he depicts the 'disorder of crates that have been wrenched open, the air saturated with the dust of wood, the floor covered with torn paper'.[9] A similar *mise-en-scene* appears in *Reader's Block*, the first of Markson's late work. The narrator, simply called 'Reader', contemplates writing a novel wherein:

Protagonist first seen poised abstractedly amid a kind of transitory disarray?

Cartons heaped and piled?

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[6] Markson interviewed by Laura Sims, *Fare Forward: Letters from David Markson*, ed. by Laura Sims (New York: PowerHouse Books, 2014), pp. 123-142 (p. 125).
[7] Ibid., p. 127.
[8] Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Collecting', *SW* 2:2, pp. 486-493 (p. 486).
[9] Ibid.

Innumerable books, Reader presumably means?[10]

The ordered row of books on a shelf belies the unassimilable heterogeneity of the objects of a collection. The book collection occupies an uneasy equilibrium between the order of their physical arrangement, the 'chaos of [the collector's] memory' and the 'disorder' of the history of their circulation.[11] As Jane O. Newman points out in *Benjamin's Library: Modernity, Nation, and the Baroque*, 'books exist in a kind of precarious "balancing act" over the abyss of chaos from which they derive and which, in their very material survival and presence, they also represent.'[12] This tension between disintegration and survival runs through every aspect of Markson's work: it can be found in his interest in periods of obscurity and fame and in the burial of artworks and their rediscovery after millennia; in his obsession with the death of others and their preservation in words and images ('The peculiar immortality of Sulpicia. Six love poems totalling only forty lines, and tacked onto the collected works of Tibullius. For two full thousand years'); in his own precarious syntax, in which subjects and predicates grasp at one another across line breaks; and in the way one fragment suddenly drops off the page, only to be reprised several pages later.[13]

This begs the question: how did Markson arrive at the fragmentary novels that comprise his final four novels? And how might reading them offer further iterations of Benjamin's thought and open up new ways of thinking about the novel?

1.1 *Wittgenstein's Mistress* Between Modernism and Postmodernism

Despite receiving favourable reviews for *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (one written by David Foster Wallace) and attracting a small critical following (Laura Sims, a critic and poet, and Francoise Palleau-Papin, a French academic), Markson remains a largely little-known author.[14] When he was mentioned in literary journalism, it was as a 'massively under-read' author; three years before he died, *Vanishing Point* and *The Last Novel* placed first on *New*

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[10] *RB*, p. 15.

[11] As Benjamin relates in the essay, methods of acquiring books are often down to chance: inheritance, auction, books appearing in pawn shops and used bookstores.

[12] Jane O. Newman, *Benjamin's Library: Modernity, Nation, and the Baroque* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 81.

[13] *NN*, p. 102.

[14] See David Foster Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum: On David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*', *Both Flesh and Not* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2012), pp. 73-120; Laura Sims, *Fare Forward: Letters from David Markson*; Francoise Palleau-Papin, *This is Not a Tragedy*, trans. Francoise Palleau-Papin (Champaign, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011).

York Magazine's list of 'Best Novels You've Never Read'.[15] During his youth, Markson became close to Malcolm Lowry, whose Joycean late modernist novel, *Under the Volcano* (1947), formed the subject of his Master's thesis.[16] Markson also frequented The White Horse, a pub in Greenwich Village, alongside Dylan Thomas, Jack Kerouac, Joseph Heller and William Gaddis. Except for Thomas, and perhaps Kerouac, most of the authors Markson associated with were not famous at the time; but Markson's place at the periphery of literary fame is foreshadowed here.

When in the later novels Markson writes of the material pressures placed on writers in societies that rarely value them and whose profession is infamous for its want of remuneration, he speaks from experience. Between 1959 and 1966 Markson wrote what he called 'entertainments': two satirical hardboiled detective novels in the vein of Raymond Chandler, *Epitaph for a Tramp* (1959) and *Epitaph for a Deadbeat* (1961), another crime novel called *Miss Doll, Go Home* (1965), and a parodic Western, *The Ballad of Dingus Magee* (1966).[17] The latter novel was his most commercially successful ('the only book I ever made money on') – Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer acquired the film rights for $75,000.[18] Markson's first 'serious' novel was *Going Down* (1970).[19] A nonlinear, multi-perspectival narrative centring around three polyamorous characters living in Mexico (an homage to Lowry, but also written while Markson lived in Mexico), *Going Down* is a blend of gothic (murder by machete, amputations, and deformity form the central action of the novel) and late modernist writing (stream-of-consciousness, allusion, pastiche). One character, a painter called Fern, serves as a prototype for *Wittgenstein's Mistress*'s Kate. Markson's next novel, *Springer's Progress* (1977), is a Joycean narrative that revolves around a hard-drinking

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[15] Katie Charles, 'The Best Novels You've Never Read', *New York Magazine*, 28 May 2007, <http://nymag.com/nymag/culture/books/32390/> [accessed 11 June 2017]. The article opens with the ghoulish and cynical proposition that the Markson's work 'was primed for a Roberto Bolaño-style resurrection.' Markson was still alive at the time.

[16] Markson wrote the first thesis on Lowry's novel for his Master's degree at Columbia University in 1951. It was later published as a critical study in 1978. See *Malcolm Lowry's Volcano: Myth, Symbol, Meaning* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2009)

[17] Despite Markson's description of these novels as 'entertainments', they were by no means facile. Markson's trademark allusiveness is present in these works, which variously reference Thoreau, Nabokov, Thomas Mann, T.S. Eliot, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Epitaph for a Tramp* (Emeryville, Calif.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1959; repr. 2006); *Epitaph for a Deadbeat* (Emeryville, Calif.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1961; repr. 2006); *Miss Doll, Go Home* (New York: Dell, 1965); *The Ballad of Dingus Magee* (New York: Dell, 1967).

[18] Dermot McEvoy, '*Publisher's Weekly Interview*: Wittgenstein's Author', *Publisher's Weekly*, 1 March 2004), pp. 44-45 (p. 44). Not even Frank Sinatra's star power ensured the film's success: it was a commercial flop. For a comprehensive literary biography of Markson, see Francoise Palleau-Papin, *This is Not a Tragedy*. Palleau-Papin's work is the only book-length analysis devoted to Markson to date and is perhaps the finest and most comprehensive resource his work currently available.

[19] Markson, *Going Down* (New York: Belmont Tower Books, 1970).

novelist experiencing writer's block, a theme carried over into his late work.[20] The protagonist, Lucien Springer, ends up writing a novel that, in a feat of meta-fictional acrobatics, becomes *Springer's Progress* itself. Neither of the novels sold well – *Springer's Progress* was deemed 'overwrit[ten]' by a contemporary reviewer.[21] Markson would not write another novel for over a decade.

After 54 rejections, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was finally published in 1988.[22] Narrated by protagonist Kate, who believes herself to be the last human on earth, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is more visibly 'experimental' than Markson's early work; it is also more traditional than his last four novels, with a recognisable plot and a clearly-defined protagonist. After the publication of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and his later novels, Markson became associated with experimentalism and the avant-garde: his obituaries describe him as a 'postmodern novelist'.[23] As James McAdams writes, Markson as postmodern novelist is, in many respects, a matter of periodisation; *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and the novels that followed it were written in a postmodern world: 'Markson's "postmodern turn" represents the postmodern turn in the arts in general'.[24] McAdams astutely argues that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* represents a 'profound rupture in Markson's career, a liminal point between his modernist past and postmodern future': the early novels placed faith in the redemptive power of allusion to locate and anchor the text in a tradition and a literary community – a Wittgensteinian *Lebensform* in which the truth and meaning of language is formed by a tacit consensus.[25] Such a community is abolished by the apocalyptic landscape of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, where Kate, the last living person on earth, can refer only to her own errant, lonely memories; memories that she herself constantly calls into question.[26]

The novel follows Kate as she attempts to shed her material belongings – clothes, cassette tapes, books – and empty her mind of memories by writing them down on a

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[20] Markson, *Springer's Progress* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977).

[21] '*Springer's Progress*', *Kirkus Review* (13 June 1977) <www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/david-markson-4/springers-progress/> [Accessed 12 June 2017].

[22] Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (Chicago; Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1988). Subsequent references are abbreviated to *WM*.

[23] Bruce Weber, 'David Markson, Postmodern Novelist, Dies at 82', *The New York Times*, 7 June 2010 <www.nytimes.com/2010/06/08/arts/08markson.html> [Accessed 10 June 2017].

[24] James McAdams, 'David Markson's Postmodern Turn: *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and "Minor Literature"', *Rhizomes* 31 (2017) <www.rhizomes.net/issue31/mcadams.html> [Accessed 9 June 2017].

[25] Ibid.

[26] For example, '[…] in fact perhaps it was Kierkegaard who said that, about anxiety being the fundamental mood of existence. If it was not Kierkegaard it was Martin Heidegger. In either case […] I am convinced I have never read a single word written by Kierkegaard or Martin Heidegger.' *WM*, p. 72.

typewriter, all of which she considers 'baggage'. Such an attempt can never be fully accomplished, however; it remains partial and incomplete. What is fragmentary cannot be eradicated: '[s]till, perhaps there is baggage after all, for all that I believed I had left baggage behind. Of a sort.'[27] Kate's project of disposal is necessarily one of dispersal, of casting the material and mental contents of one's life aside, only for them to scatter to the winds or across the page. The point, here, is that intellectual jetsam will always wash up again somewhere. When Kate's rowboat is washed offshore, she meditates, '[s]ometimes I like to believe that it has been carried all of the way across the ocean by now, to tell the truth.'[28] And: '[f]requently, certain objects wash up onto the shore here that would well have been carried just as far in the opposite direction, as a matter of fact.'[29]

Despite her conviction that no other living soul exists, Kate habitually writes messages to unknown, apparently non-existent readers. While McAdams rightly focuses on Markson's construction of profound isolation in this text as a reflection of the 'social abandonism' of postmodernity, it is important to read Kate's messages as an attempt to communicate despite the apparent hopelessness; even Kate's fantasy of the rowboat being carried across the ocean is a fantasy of something *arriving* at a destination as if a message in a bottle.[30] The first sentence of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is '[i]n the beginning, sometimes I left messages in the street.'[31] When she moves to an abandoned beach, Kate recounts how she often wrote messages in the sand: '[s]omebody is living on this beach, the messages would say. […] Actually, nothing that I wrote was ever still there when I went back in any case, always being washed away.'[32] It may appear, at first, that there is a vital difference between a material object (the rowboat) and writing (in the sand): the former washes up someplace, the latter disappears, never to return. However, the common element between the material object and the seemingly intangible letter is that both are subject to dispersal; and in the text of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and Markson's later novels, writing – in the form of a fact, an anecdote, or a trivial detail – disappears from the page only to appear again on a different page, in a slightly different form. *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and the novels that follow it may be portraits of extreme loneliness, acute isolation and abandonment, but they

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[27] Ibid., p. 15.
[28] Ibid, 57.
[29] Ibid.
[30] McAdams, n.p.
[31] *WM*, p. 7
[32] Ibid., p. 57.

also make radical attempts to reach out of this void, to make contact and convey something significant: '[s]omebody is living in the Louvre, certain messages would say'.[33] Somebody is living. I am here.

This attempt to connect – the desire to make contact with a potential 'referee' or mediator rather than become subsumed in a postmodern zone free of any referent, is what makes *Wittgenstein's Mistress* a 'liminal' text suspended between modernism and postmodernism. But Markson's last four novels are even more difficult to place in either category: they are allusive, self-referential, and carry an implicit sense of the modernist dictum 'make it new' – in *This is Not a Novel* (a reference to Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), the narrator declares that the work is 'Novelist's personal genre. In which part of the experiment is to continue keeping him offstage to the greatest extent possible'.[34] Such an assertion recalls Joyce's description of the artist who, 'like the God of creation, remains […] invisible, refined out of existence', or Flaubert's invisible author.[35] By the same turn, the late novels' self-avowed intertextuality and fragmented deconstruction of the novel form align themselves with postmodern stylistics. In many ways, Markson's work draws out the vexed distinctions between modernism and postmodernism in literature, evidence that, as 'mere period labels', they have been 'drained of their provocative cultural significance' since the modernism/postmodernism debate began.[36] It is worth noting that this debate emerged during Markson's lifetime, and though it still endures today, it is a discussion that is over sixty years old. Without dismissing this debate, I would like to suggest a more useful category, one which addresses the 'untimeliness' of Markson's work: late style.

1.2 Markson's Late Style

The stylistic and formal shift from the verbose, linguistically playful modernism of Markson's early novels to the spare, ascetic prose of the late novels is related to the 'baggage' Kate tries to jettison. But rather than dramatise the attempt to discard personal and cultural memories, as *Wittgenstein's Mistress* does, Markson turns his eye toward the

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[33] Ibid., p. 7.
[34] *The Last Novel* (Berkeley, Calif.: Counterpoint, 2007), p. 175. Subsequent references are abbreviated to *LN*.
[35] James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Collector's Library, 2005), p. 249.
[36] Sanford Schwartz, 'The Postmodernity of Modernism', *The Future of Modernism,* ed. by Hugh Witemeyer (Ann Arbor: Univeristy of Michigan Press, 1997; repr. 2000), pp. 9-32 (p. 11). I will discuss the relationship between modernism, late modernism, and postmodernism through a Benjaminian lens of history and temporality in the conclusion to this study.

'furniture' of the traditional novel. In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, the author uses 'baggage' once more, this time to describe discarding 'the baggage of the usual novel: plot, character, dramatic incidents, dramatic scenes [to the point that it] sounds as if nothing much is left'.[37] What is implicit but remains unsaid in McAdams's essay is that the real apocalyptic event of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is the loss of a modernist aesthetic whose 'models of knowledge are ultimately untenable': 'Kate is unable to cherish or properly "nostalgize" famous thinkers' in the way Joyce, Eliot, Pound, and Nabokov did.[38] Modernism is a place to which Markson can no longer return, as Steven Moore further elucidates when he writes that 'for earlier writers (and in Markson's earlier works), culture was stable and objective, an orderly accumulation of facts.'[39] In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, however, culture is unstable and subjective, a fading memory of "baggage" that teases Kate with false connections'.[40]

What is left out of these discussions of Markson's modernism, late modernism, and modernism is his age. Unlike many writers of his generation born in the late 1920s, Markson lived to see the twenty-first century. Markson was 70 years old when *Reader's Block* was published. By the time *The Last Novel* debuted, he was 81. Having suffered a heart attack and bouts of cancer, any of the late novels might have been 'the last'. Presented without comment in *The Last Novel* are the words 'Old. Tired. Sick. Alone. Broke.'[41] It might, therefore, be more useful to consider Markson's work in terms of Edward Said's notion of 'late style'. As Said writes, drawing from Adorno, '[b]oth in art and in our general ideas about the passage of human life there is assumed to be a general abiding *timeliness*.'[42] In contrast, the 'late' artist is characterised by a sense of 'untimeliness'; they are exiled from the time of their youth and from the contemporary moment in which they find themselves living. This is not to say that Markson's work is ahistorical, or somehow 'transcends' history – far from it. To quote Said once more, '[l]ateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present'.[43] The quotation of

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[37] Markson interviewed by Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*, KCRW Radio, 25 September 2008, <www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/david-markson> [accessed 1 June 2017]
[38] McAdams, n.p.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Moore qtd in McAdams. See also Steven Moore, 'David Markson and the Art of Allusion', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10.2 (1990): pp. 164-179 (p. 175).
[41] These words recur throughout *The Last Novel*. See p. 2, p. 3, p. 93, and p. 100.
[42] Edward Said, 'Thoughts on Late Style', *London Review of Books*, 26.15, 5 August 2004 <www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n15/edward-said/thoughts-on-late-style> [Accessed 10 June 2017]. Said derives the term 'late style' from Adorno's essay fragment 'Spätstil Beethovens', later published posthumously in *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. by Rolf Tiedmann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998; repr 2007).
[43] Said, 'Thoughts on Late Style'.

Adorno's which Said uses to illustrate the subjectivity of the late artist and the formal qualities of late style describes Markson's late work precisely:

> This law is revealed precisely in the thought of death […] *Death is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art*, and thus it has appeared in art only in a refracted mode, as allegory […] The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art. *Of the works themselves it leaves only fragments behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself*. Touched by death, the hand of the master *sets free the masses of material that he used to form*; *its tears and fissures*, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with Being, are its final work.[44]

Adorno is referring to Beethoven's very late sonatas and quartets, known for their discontinuous structure, and which are filled with interruptions and abrupt silences. Markson's late work is self-consciously 'discontinuous' and 'non-linear', 'an assemblage' of 'masses of material' (*pace* Adorno). Although each fragment reprises certain themes – the dominant one is death, others are the creation, destruction, and recovery of works, as well as poverty, illness, and everyday details – the way they interrelate on the page is not immediately discernible. Such themes blur into one another and disappear as quickly as they coalesce. Although the novels are relatively short, never exceeding 200 pages, the vast quantity and alternating arrangement of fragmentary sentences impedes any clean demarcations between such themes. The fragments are not held together by a progressive narrative or given any exposition – in other words, their appearance is uncontextualised. Instead, Markson's fragments are held together by the white blanks between each sentence; they act as negative spaces which nevertheless link each discrete sentence to their potential connections [Fig. 1].

Adorno characterises Beethoven's late work in terms of fragmentation: there are 'sudden discontinuities', 'moments of breaking away', the work takes leave of itself – it 'is silent at the instant it is left behind'; it is composed of 'tears and fissures'; musical conventions are 'splintered off' from the compositional themes, which are 'fallen away and

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[44] Adorno qtd. in Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007 [2006]) pp. 9-10. My emphases.

abandoned'.[45] In the background, Said writes, is the 'decay of the body', 'a sense of abandonment', 'a lamenting personality' that 'seems to inhabit the late works'.[46] In the discourse of late style, bodily decline and mortality are linked to the 'decay' of structural coherence; the abrupt quietude of death inflects the sudden abandonment of theme and convention. There is distinctly melancholy tenor to late style, coupled with an 'irascibility' which does not withdraw from creation but defiantly produces work, rips up convention, tears up serene harmonies and linear narratives. This form of melancholy is a radical refusal to mourn – to paraphrase Eric Santner, it 'says no!' to a graceful departure from creative life or the repetition of old, faithful tricks.[47] As Said writes, the melancholy of late style is 'a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against…*'[48] The sense of isolation and abandonment inherent in the lines, 'Nobody comes. Nobody calls', is a chiastic reflection of Markson's 'abandonment' of narrative structure and his 'isolation' of ephemera, obscure anecdotes, and cultural scraps.

To summarise, late style is an aesthetic response to the proximity of death; Markson's literary response reflects, stylistically and formally, a view of death as the experience of a sudden discontinuity, a breaking-off from life through the use of fragmentation, disjunctive syntax, and textual pauses. From *Reader's Block* onward, Markson's novels signal the author's late style; furthermore, the diegetic subjectivity of his narrators is marked by an overriding sense of lateness. But by the same turn, late style marks a stage of continued creative life in which a new style is born, a reappraisal and rearrangement of the body of work that lies behind it and with which it decisively breaks. But when Markson splits his sentences, he does not merely create a syntax that is mimetic of death; more importantly, the brokenness of these sentences opens them up to new ways of meaning which stress what comes *after* rather than what arrives 'too late'. It is at this point that Adorno's emphasis on lateness becomes adjacent to Benjamin's concept of *Nachleben* (afterlife) as adumbrated in

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[45] Adorno qtd. in Said, p. 11.
[46] Said, pp. 8-11.
[47] Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 89. Santner does not share this view of melancholy, which, following a dubious citation of Slavoj Žižek, he deems 'politically correct'. Instead, he seeks 'a middle position between two competing claims about the ethical status of melancholy', that is, a position between interpretations of melancholy as radical fidelity to the lost object and as a failure to properly mourn. Santner, pp. 89-90.
[48] Said, p. 7. Original emphases and ellipsis.

the translation essay, whereby the translation enacts a 'breaking away' from the original text whereby the original to takes on an altered but renewed form of life.[49]

32   DAVID MARKSON

John Locke died while sitting in a drawing room listening to someone read from the Psalms.

Novalis died while listening to a relative play the piano.

The wintry conscience of a generation.
V. S. Pritchett called George Orwell.

A poem by Theocritus written in Alexandria ca. 270 BC—
Complaining that the streets were too crowded.

Antonin Artaud spent nine of his last eleven years in insane asylums.

For decades, next door to the building in The Hague that had housed Spinoza's attic:
The Spinoza Saloon.

Man is the only animal that knows he must die.
Said Voltaire.

St.-John Perse. Who was translated into English by Eliot.
And into German by Rilke.

September 9, 1960, Jussi Bjoerling died on.

Looked into by church authorities at Arnstadt in 1706, where Bach at twenty was organist:
By what right he had recently caused the strange maiden to be invited into the organ loft?

One day I wrote her name upon the strand.

Figure 1. Page 32, *The Last Novel*.

Late style is an 'afterlife' within a life. While the these (late) novels indicate Markson's late style in Adornian terms, helping us to reconcile the vexed matter of periodising him, the content and presentation of these novels pertain to what Benjamin calls 'the afterlife of *works*'.[50]

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[49] See Rodolphe Gasché, 'Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin's Theory of Language', *Studies in 20th Century Literature*, 11.1 (September 1986), pp. 69-90. Gasché's reading of Benjamin's early language writings leads him to suggest that human language is the 'afterlife' of the paradisiacal 'pure language'. See *SW* 1, pp. 62-74.

[50] *AP*, [N2,3], p. 461. My emphasis. Adorno's essay 'Valéry Proust Museum' mentions 'the afterlife of works' exactly three times without mentioning his colleague Benjamin. See 'Valéry Proust Museum' in *Prisms*, pp.173-186. Although it is beyond the scope of this present argument, a reading of this essay

1.3 Afterlife (I): History, Time, Textuality

The mutuality of Benjamin's philosophical writings and Markson's late novels comes together in a fragment from 'Konvolut N' of *The Arcades Project*: 'Historical "understanding" is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the "afterlife of works," in the analysis of "fame," is therefore to be considered the foundation of history.'[51] Benjamin's privileging of the 'afterlife' is radical and strategic: it opposes the methodology of the late nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke, for whom history is the objective science which 'merely [tells] how it really was'.[52] Ranke's historicism refused to 'judge the past and to instruct the contemporary world as to the future' – in other words, history was an empirical science, not moral philosophy.[53] Benjamin's last major essay, 'On the Concept of History' (1940), is a pointed critique of Ranke's historicism, asserting that '[a]rticulating the past historically *does not mean* recognising it "the way it really was."'[54] Ranke's method was distinguished by its emphasis on original sources such as archival documents, bureaucratic records, and government reports rather than chronicles and contemporary histories – an approach that unmistakably retains its value and remains the basis of present-day historiographical practice.

Yet Benjamin recognised what Ranke overlooked: that even documentary evidence can be biased (or indeed falsified) and that official data is ideologically determined and selected. This is what Benjamin attacks when he writes, famously, that 'there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'.[55] Unlike Ranke, Benjamin regards history as subject to an ethical imperative whereby 'history is not simply a science but not least a form of remembrance.' Indeed, 'what science has determined' as the victors and losers, 'remembrance can modify.'[56] It does this by 'constantly calling into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers.'[57] Thus, while historicism's model of

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alongside Benjamin's remarks on the afterlife of works in 'Task of the Translator' and *The Arcades Project* would be a rich and fruitful one.

[51] Ibid.

[52] 'You have reckoned that history ought to judge the past and to instruct the contemporary world as to the future. The present attempt does not yield to that high office. It will merely tell how it really was.' Ranke qtd in Edward Muir, 'Leopold von Ranke, His Library, and the Shaping of Historical Evidence', *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier*, 22.1 (Spring 1987), 3-10 (p. 4).

[53] Ranke qtd in Muir, ibid.

[54] Benjamin, 'On the Concept', *SW* 4, pp. 329-411 (p. 391). My emphases.

[55] Ibid., p. 392.

[56] Benjamin, *AP*, [N8,1], p. 471.

[57] 'On the Concept', p. 390.

temporality is a monodirectional one which privileges 'what really happened' (as if such a determination were possible) without regarding its relevance to the past or to the future, Benjamin's concept of history views past, present, and future as engaged in a complex and mutually transformative relationship. The complexity of this temporality derives from its explicitly non-synchronic character. Benjamin's concept of history is centred on writing and textuality. This is clear in 'On the Concept of History' when he writes that 'the past carries with it a secret *index* by which it is referred to redemption'; and 'only for a redeemed mankind has its past become *citable* in all its moments'; this can be seen, too, in the earlier quotation about 'documents' of civilisation and barbarism.[58] The language of textuality is no doubt in large part due to the influence of Jewish theology and mysticism, similarly organised around books and exegetical scrutiny. Even if the role of the theological in his work were minimized, as critics such as Irving Wohlfarth wish it to be, it is clear that Benjamin locates his philosophy in textual terms even when he writes about the dialectical image:[59]

> What distinguishes images from the 'essences' of phenomenology is their historical index. […] *the historical index of images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain legibility only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding 'to legibility' constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior.* Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each 'now' is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) *It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.* In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. *The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its*

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[58] Ibid.

[59] Wohlfarth writes: 'the task facing today's students of Benjamin is to find ways through his work; to renew his efforts to "blot out" the theology in which it was steeped.' Irving Wohlfarth, 'The Measure of the Possible, the Weight of the Real and the Heat of the Moment: Benjamin's Actuality Today', *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 20 (Summer 1993), pp. 13-39 (p. 7).

recognisability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.[60]

Several strands of thought are put into motion in this dense and complicated passage. First, Benjamin insists here on opposing temporality to the dialectical, and for good reason: by discarding the terms 'past' and 'present', he can evade the terms of Rankean historicism and assert the image as something which, as the arrest of time, operates outside of time and belongs to another category altogether: the dialectical. This does not mean that time is altogether abolished from Benjamin's account of history.[61] (For Benjamin, the task of constructing a new form of anti-historicist history necessitated a redefinition of time itself.) Rather, he adjusts the terms with which history is conceived and discussed: not the 'past', but the 'what has been'; not the 'present' but the 'now'.[62] The collision of these terms brings about a 'particular' temporality in which two events are brought into relation: the 'what has been' belonging to the 'particular time' (its origin) and the 'particular time' (in the future, at some other moment) the past attains its legibility. The temporality that results from this coincidence is what Benjamin calls 'the Now of a particular recognisability'. These images are 'charged to the bursting point with time' because the encounter between what we know of as the past (what has been) and the present (now) constitutes a rupture of the linear continuum that conditions such terms, filling the vacant space of 'empty, homogeneous time' with a plenitude of multi-temporal moments.[63]

This brings me to my second point. In the remarks quoted above Benjamin is developing his own constellation of two strands of thought which come together ('in a flash') in his use textual rhetoric throughout: legibility, indexicality, reading. The first strand of thought is the interrelation of temporalities (which he nonetheless distinguishes from the concept of the temporal which he associates with Heidegger's phenomenology) – I have already outlined some of these subtleties, but it is worth probing them a bit more. Benjamin 'explodes' the linear continuum of historicist time in order to liberate history from the positivist yoke of universal history where each catastrophe is deemed to occur in the service

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[60] *AP* [N3,1], p. 463. My emphases.
[61] Although a redeemed or fulfilled history such as the arrival of the Messiah would indeed abolish time, and the materialist historian's task is to 'arrest' or freeze the progressive flow of history. The dialectical image as arrest is a miniature version of this, but because such an arrest is only momentary, it is still linked to time, hence its 'weak messianism'.
[62] I am alluding to Benjamin's essay on Kafka, where he describes the coming of the Messiah, 'who (a great rabbi once said) will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment in it'. See 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death', *SW* 2:2, pp. 794-818 (p. 811).
[63] Benjamin mentions 'empty, homogeneous time' in 'On the Concept', p. 392.

of progress. Events are no longer linked in a determinate chain that subsumes the particular to the general, rather, they are allowed the possibility of being recognised as 'small individual moment[s]' recognised as having once been 'nows', and through their recognition in the present, are restored once again to the realm of 'the now'. These discrete fragments of time, credited with a history of their own, are no longer linked in a causal chain; instead, they carry the potential to form constellations.

Taken generally, constellations are groups of relatively proximate stars which are then 'read' as forming recognisable shapes or patterns. Constellations are not permanent – they depend on the viewer's position in the hemisphere, belief systems and culture: while some rise in popularity, others fade into obscurity. Finally, the pattern of a constellation is not fixed, but shifts or even disappears with the passing of millennia. In essays written between 1929 and 1933, before the constellation's development as a dialectical concept, Benjamin remarks that divinatory practices – astrology, haruspicy, augury – were preliterate practices of reading quite literally *avant la lettre*: 'The schoolboy reads his ABC book, and the astrologer reads the future in the stars. […] [T]he astrologer reads the constellation from the stars in the sky; simultaneously, he reads the future or fate from it.'[64] The constellation is thus both the condition of writing and the possibility of reading that is tied to a 'critical moment' in time (in astrology, this is the moment of birth); this provides the basis for the reading of writing 'in which similarities flash up fleeting out of the stream of things only to sink down once more'. Here, 'similarities' inheres the meaningful combination of words, the relation of subject, predicate, noun, verb, etc that flash into the reader's perception 'out of the stream' or sentence, 'only to sink down once more' with the approach of the following sentence. Each moment of reading, 'if it is not to forsake understanding altogether […] is subject to a […] critical moment, which the reader must not forget at any cost lest he go away empty-handed.'[65]

The time of reading is fleeting and transitory, constituted by a succession of moments where the eye meets each unit of text; each of these moments presents the reader with a 'critical moment' offering the possibility of 'understanding' which the reader must seize and *remember* for that possibility to be grasped. The somewhat tautological task of the reader is 'to read' – not passively but actively and authentically, much as Benjamin's historian is

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[64] 'Doctrine of the Similar', *SW* 2:2, pp. 694-698 (p. 697). See also 'On the Mimetic Faculty', *SW* 2:2, pp. 720-722.
[65] 'Doctrine of the Similar', p. 698. Hereafter shortened to 'Doctrine'.

charged with recognising authentic time. The reader and the historical materialist are thus confronted with the same task: the arrest of the 'critical moment' and its remembrance. The succession of moments which unremittingly flit by can't be altered – we can't reverse the clock, and 'the slain are really slain' – but the critical moment that arrests and interrupts this succession, transforms history from a progressive narrative into something more like a montage.[66] This moment of arrest, writes Carlo Salzani, 'is what allows history to become legible, to become a text' capable of being read.[67] Benjamin's authentic historical time is also literary time.

Markson's novels offer a concrete instantiation of Benjamin's concept of afterlife and its discontinuous temporality. Indeed, Markson's narrators have no proper names, each instead bearing an allegorical title that is in some way related to the act of reading: in *Reader's Block,* he is explicitly called 'Reader'; in *This is Not a Novel,* 'Writer'; in *Vanishing Point*, 'Author'; and in *The Last Novel*, 'Novelist'. Benjamin's materialist historian is, above all, a reader; and if history is to be 'read' like a text, then the novel offers an opportunity to explore the limits of its legibility. I read Markson's approach to the novel as running parallel to Benjamin's approach to history: Markson 'reads' – and writes – the novel 'against the grain', brushing up against the traditional linearity of the literary narrative. The physical form of the book necessitates that we read it 'in order', flipping the numbered pages from beginning to end (though there is of course nothing stopping the reader from reading back to front or picking a page at random). This ordering of the book, which mimics the ordering of traditional narratives (beginning, middle, end), pressures us to read progressively, encountering each event 'like the beads of a rosary.'[68] It reproduces the kind of historicist time that Benjamin rejects. Despite its physical form, Markson's book actively resists this temporality of reading, for there is no narrative progression to speak of; the numbered pages do not tell us where we are or where we are going. The constellations the reader draws from Markson's fragments arrests this linear flow.

Likewise, and most importantly to Benjamin's concept of history, we only understand or cognise what has been read after we have read a text. This does not minimise the moment of actuality that occurs during reading; as is well known, Benjamin often speaks in terms of immediacy – instants, moments, flashes – recognition happens 'now', in a 'flash', but this

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[66] Horkheimer, letter to Benjamin, 16 March 1937, in *AP*, p. 471.
[67] Carlo Salzani, *Constellations of Reading: Walter Benjamin in Figures of Actuality* (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 210.
[68] 'On the Concept', p. 397.

moment must be held in memory if it is to be politically and ethically productive, and it can occur only *after* the act of reading. Of course, this can be said to apply to every text that is read, but Markson's work incorporates the temporality of reading into the very form of his work, translating the experience of reading (or, as Benjamin might say, 'the read') back into the structure of text itself. Markson's narrators, who were conceived when the author was in his late 70s, are all portrayed – semi-autobiographically – as aging authors. The inherent belatedness of reading is therefore intensely dramatised. It reminds us that every novel is, in a sense, 'posthumous' of its own creation, engendering a spectral relationship between author (disembodied to the reader) and reader (absent and speculative to the writing writer). The act of writing gestures somewhere beyond the writer, just as the text that is read comes from someone and somewhere *other* than the reader. Markson does not ever portray his narrators in the act of reading; instead, they are constantly engaged in the act of remembrance, their memories and recollections of reading narrated as they 'flash up' in the minds of these protagonists.

1.4 Afterlife (II): Fame

In Benjamin's terms, Markson's fragments would be the 'images' whose 'index' belongs to the past, but which 'attain legibility only at a particular time' on a particular page, just as translation 'comes later than the original.'[69] Historical understanding by its very nature cannot be simultaneous with the occurrence of its object; it can only be arrived at 'after' the fact. 'What has been' indicates an action that 'will have been' completed at a 'particular point' in the future (this is its 'messianic' structure by which it is 'referred to redemption'). Peter Szondi correctly notes that 'what has been' is 'not the perfect [tense], but the future perfect in the fullness of its paradox: being future and past at the same time.'[70] It is a temporality which recognises that time is incomplete: it is 'in particular' - 'in parts'. Where this temporality unfolds, I want to suggest, is in the literary text 'in particular'.

The content of Markson's novels often place particular focus on the everyday life of authors, artists, athletes, poets, painters, musicians, scientists, and philosophers: 'Euripides' mother was a fruit seller'; 'Paracelsus may have died after a brawl in a tavern'; 'Francois Villon's heatless garret near the Sorbonne – where his inkwell froze solid'; 'George Sand

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Peter Szondi, 'Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin', trans. by Harvey Mendelsohn, *Critical Inquiry*, 4.3 (Spring 1978), pp. 491-506 (p. 499).

did virtually all of her writing between midnight and six AM - and then slept until three in the afternoon.'[71] In collecting these facts, Markson reminds the reader that these figures, now firmly established in the canonical firmament, are not 'characters', but were indeed once living, breathing, sometimes freezing, human beings who occupied the material plane of their now-historical worlds. He reasserts the 'life' of these lives not only by allowing them to 'live on' in his own work, but by tracing the history – the afterlife - of their works. At first glance, it would seem that in humanising his subjects, Markson is merely glorifying the famous denizens of Western literature, many of whom are in regular rotation on syllabuses in English departments the world over. However, a more scrupulous reading quickly disabuses us of this notion and reveals Markson's scathing critique of the formation of such a canon. In a review of *Reader's Block*, Steven Moore asserts that the 'common theme' of Markson's late novels is Schopenhauer's *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851), where the philosopher writes:

> I wish someone would one day attempt a tragic history of literature, showing how the various nations which now take their highest pride in the great writers and artists they can show treated them while they were alive. In such a history, the author would bring visibly before us that endless struggle which the good and genuine of all ages and all lands has to endure against the always dominant bad and wrong-headed; depict the martyrdom of almost every genuine enlightener of mankind, almost every great master of every art; show us how, with a few exceptions, they lived tormented lives in poverty and wretchedness, without recognition, without sympathy, without disciples, while fame, honour and riches went to the unworthy […][72]

Although it would be easy to dismiss this as the shrill complaint of an overlooked ego, what Moore touches on vis-à-vis Schopenhauer, and which Markson's novels emphasise with great pathos, is that the 'fame' and 'honour' either apportioned or withheld by critics to

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[71] *RB*, p. 82, 31; *NN*, p. 40; *Vanishing Point* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004), p. 115. Hereafter abbreviated to *VP*; *TLN*, p. 125.

[72] Schopenhauer qtd. in Steven Moore, 'This is Not a Review', *American Book Review*, 37.4 (May/June 2016), pp. 17-19 (p. 17). To be clear, the novel itself does not cite this passage from *Parerga and Paralipomena*, but an entirely different quotation, which exposes Schopenhauer as a misogynist who regarded women as a 'broad-hipped and short-legged race' deemed 'the fair sex' only by men 'whose intellect is clouded by [their] sexual impulses', *RB*, p. 138. Earlier in the novel, Markson calls Schopenhauer an anti-Semite with no further comment ('Schopenhauer was an anti-Semite', p. 8). It is perversely ironic that a book by such an author should encapsulate Markson's late oeuvre in a single paragraph – but irony is rife in *Reader's Block* and the subsequent novels, and Moore is right to suggest that Markson's work gathers itself around the theme of critical neglect.

artists has very real, very material consequences. The illusion of meritocracy is perhaps no greater than in the realm of art and literature, and Markson is interested in reminding us that artists who experienced critical derision and financial precarity (if not grinding poverty) are later valorised as uncontested geniuses. For instance, readers of Markson's novels will learn that Florentines cried, 'What beautiful marble you have ruined' when Donatello presented his fountain of Neptune in the Piazza della Signoria; that '[t]hroughout much of her life, Marina Tsvetayeva was forced to endure practically a beggar's existence'; that Richard Lovelace 'sometime[s] scavenged for garbage to subsist. And [died] of consumption in a cellar'; that Etienne Joseph Théophile Thoré 'resurrected Vermeer after two full centuries of disregard.'[73]

The observation that artists and writers rarely receive their just rewards is not unique to Schopenhauer or Markson; his late novels are full of other voices that acknowledge such a state of affairs:

> Minor authors – who lived, men know not how, and died obscure, men marked not when.
>
> Roger Ashton takes notice of.
>
> Those rare intellects who, not only without reward, but in miserable poverty, brought forth their works.
>
> Vasari likewise commemorates.
>
> […]
>
> My time will come.
>
> Said Gregor Mendell, ignored throughout his life.[74]

Rather than write a hitherto unwritten 'tragic history of literature', Markson is signalling that all cultural history, even history as such, is tragic. Tragedy, by definition, is rooted in belated recognition. What is important, and what rescues such a position from nihilism and brings it within the remit of Benjamin's messianic account of history, is that recognition is possible. What underlies Moore's observation vis-à-vis Schopenhauer is the dialectic of fame and obscurity; both terms are conditioned by the act of recognition. One mode of recognition is

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[73] *LN*, p. 73; *RB*, p. 53; p. 31; p. 125.
[74] Ibid., pp. 182-183.

cultural acknowledgment: whether a 'nation […] takes their highest pride in the great writers and artist'. This form of the recognition of a work is measured by its circulation and, it cannot be ignored, by its commercial value. Additionally, for a work to be 'famous', it must be read, written about – be *spoken of.* This, I believe, is what Benjamin is referring to when he appends 'the analysis of fame' to his definition of historical understanding. Markson articulates the movement from recognition to obscurity (and back again) many times over, but there are two fragments from *This Is Not a Novel* which resonate most with the conditions of I have just described. On page 29, Markson writes: 'For as long as a millennium, until well into the Middle Ages, Menander was the most widely quoted author in Western literature outside Homer.' Menander's fame is measured by the rate at which his work is quoted in other works. This sentence is followed by several other apparently unrelated and random sentences until page 40, where Markson adds: 'Except for fragments quoted by others, everything of Menander's disappeared utterly in the Dark Ages. A first complete play was not discovered until excavations in Egypt during Reader's own lifetime'.

These two quotations (about quotation) contain the keywords to Markson's late work: fragment, quotation, disappearance, excavation. It is toward the two former terms, fragment and quotation, that I wish to draw attention next. Quotation allows further iterations of a work to exist even if the original of the work 'disappear[s] utterly'; this disappearance refers to the loss of the work's material presence which is reanimated through quotation. What quotation allows for is the circulation of the traces of a lost work, in other words, the work's *survival*. Although Markson's works are morbid in the extreme, obsessively recounting suicides and other deaths, his last four novels are orientated toward survival rather than extinction. My claim does not exclude the importance death plays in his work; indeed, death provides the 'matter' of his novels. Insofar as death is *cited* in Markson's texts, it is linked to remembrance, and thus to the fragmented survival of the works and the artist's signature therein. Such remembrance is actualised through the moment of reading.

1.5 Afterlife (III): Of Works

As a form of remembrance and thus survival, is quotation, then, really a matter of life and death? Schopenhauer's remarks on fame (which Moore quotes in relation to Markson) suggest so: he is concerned with the *posthumous* recognition of artists who were denied popular recognition (and the requisite material comforts) '*while they were alive'.*[75] What's

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[75] My emphasis.

more, Schopenhauer describes having died in obscurity as 'martyrdom', using terms like 'torment', 'wretchedness' and 'poverty'. Such language resonates with Markson's work, which relates fragments of the impoverished, 'tormented' lives of artists.[76] Benjamin elaborates the constellation of life, history, and afterlife in a passage from his essay on translation:

> A translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origins, their translation marks their stage of continued life. The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity.[77]

Viewed from the perspective of Markson's novels, we might also add that just as 'works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin', neither do they find their readers. Moreover, as Steven Rendall remarks, it is possible to 'define translation as quotation in another language': since a translation is the iteration of a text in another, foreign, language, it fulfils a similar function to quotation, which likewise (and often violently) transports the words of others into a new text.[78] Because there is an intervening period, sometimes of centuries, between the origin of a work and its translation, translation thus 'marks their stage of continued life.' However, this 'continued' form of life or afterlife does not mean the original is perfectly preserved – indeed, as Benjamin writes later in this essay, 'it is not the highest praise of a translation […] to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language'.[79] Rather, 'in its after life – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change'.[80] Thus, afterlife pertains not to the eternal or to immortality, but to mutability; to a form of survival that acknowledges and is predicated by a certain measure of destruction and even loss.

If the afterlife of works, its modalities of quotation and translation, and its fragmentary structure pivot on both a spectral notion of death implicit in the 'after' (*Nach*-) and life (-

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[76] It also has much in common with Benjamin's description of the baroque mourning play or *Trauerspiel*, and his writings on the impoverishment of experience; additionally, it echoes the terminology of current trends in political theology associated with Agamben, and its application to literary studies such as those of Santner and Hanssen.
[77] Benjamin, 'Task', pp. 253-263 (p. 255).
[78] Steven Rendall, 'Translation, Quotation, Iterability', *TTR* 10.2 (1997), pp. 167-189 (p. 176).
[79] 'Task', p. 260.
[80] Ibid, p. 256.

leben), what does Benjamin mean when he insists that it be 'regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity'? Such a position requires no less than a radical and expansive definition of life that is not based on nature, but on history:

> Even in times of narrowly prejudiced thought there was an inkling that life was not limited to organic corporality. But it cannot be a matter of extending its dominion under the feeble sceptre of the soul, as Fechner tried to do, or, conversely, of basing its definition on even less conclusive factors of animality, such as sensation, which characterises life only occasionally. 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. In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by the standpoint of history rather than that of nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul. The philosopher's task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history.[81]

To reduce to life to 'mere corporeality' is to define life as 'mere' or 'bare' life *pace* Agamben – clearly, this is not an ethical way to identify life. Life is therefore not ascribed to everything that technically has a pulse, but to everything that has a history. In turn, for life to be 'given its due', which is to say, for life to be 'redeemed', one must also extend history to that which has a life. As Andrew Benjamin writes, '[h]aving a history includes plants and animals – perhaps even rocks – even though the way history figures in relation to such entities remains an important if unresolved project. […] If the lives of animals can be reconsidered as historical, then the question of what counts as history will have to be rethought.'[82] What Benjamin calls for in the translation essay is not just a radical definition of life, but of a definition of history that respects life.

From the standpoint of history, life would not be determined by corporeality or sensation, but by 'the *expression* of its nature, in the presentation of its significance' – even

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[81] Ibid, p. 255.
[82] Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 2013, pp. 229-230. This work is one of the finest recent publications on Benjamin's political philosophy and has been instrumental to my understanding of the concepts of life and afterlife. Other major work in this area includes Sigrid Weigel's *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, trans. by Chadwick Smith, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

the mute expressiveness of plants, animals, and rocks.[83] Works of art, as expressions of the nature of life, may be regarded as having not only an afterlife, but as the 'afterlife of life'. Therefore, Benjamin writes:

> And indeed, isn't the afterlife of works of art far more easy to recognise than that of living creatures? The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realisation in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame. Translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when a work, in the course of its survival, has reached the age of its fame. Contrary, therefore, to the claims of bad translators, such translations do not so much serve the works as owe their existence to it. In them the life of the original attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding.

What at first appears to be a troubling assertion of 'works' above 'living creatures' becomes more generous and comprehensible once it is viewed considering the above remarks on Benjamin's notions of life and afterlife. The 'afterlife of works' provides a 'continually renewed' index to the 'models' from which they descend, their original 'realisation', and their historical potentiality in 'succeeding generations' – this last point means that the afterlife is also an index to its future (after)life, an index that gestures toward a potential, unseen, but appointed afterlife. It would, however, be mistaken to suggest that 'the afterlife of works' is fixed and secure, even if Benjamin uses the word 'eternal' to describe a work's afterlife in 'succeeding generations'. If works were immortal, they would not have an afterlife: where this assertion manifests itself, to borrow Benjamin's rhetoric, is in his invocation of fame, as Markson's late works make acutely clear. Even the material survival of the works themselves, like the continued remembrance of artists and their work, is precarious and highly contingent:

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[83] 'Task', p. 255. In Benjamin's essay on language, even 'mute' nature – plants, animals, etc – are endowed with a kind of language. See 'On the Language of Man and on Language as Such', *SW*:1, pp. 62-74. For a fuller elaboration of Benjamin's concept of mute nature, see Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings and Angels* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2000).

> Throughout the Middle Ages, often no more than a single manuscript of certain classics existed. One leaking monastery roof and the *Satyricon* could have been lost forever, for instance.[84]

> 380 A.D. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, Bishop of Constantinople - ordered Sappho's poems to be burned.

> 1073 A.D. Pope Gregory VII - ordered Sappho's poems to be burned.[85]

> Any number of literary works were flung into Savonarola's conflagrations with the rest. With print still in its essential infancy, how many irreplaceable single copies of Greek and Latin manuscripts were lost?[86]

Markson's narrator asks, 'how many irreplaceable single copies […] were lost?' The other excerpts I have quoted above emphasise the fact of having survived multiple attempts at destruction, not only by clerics but by the vicissitudes of nature. That the *Satyricon* or any other manuscript was one 'leaking monastery roof' away from oblivion is no less than a miracle that Markson enters into his own manuscript with an implied sense of wonder. The hole in the papyrus, the leak in the roof, the gaps between Markson's own fragments, are entrances of the messianic that recall the 'small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter'.[87] Andrew Benjamin explains that 'this line [of Benjamin's] locates […] the possibility that holds at every moment for what *is* to be *other than it is*.'[88] This insight further elaborates what has been uncovered in an earlier section about afterlife, wherein such an afterlife is not immortal, but transient and ephemeral. The object of afterlife is subject to destruction, yes, but within and beside it lies the potentiality of rescue and redemption: 'Apelles' long-lost *Birth of Venus,* painted 1,800 years before Botticelli's – and said to have been a likeness of Phryne, the most beautiful of them all.'[89]

Thus, we learn that one of the most famous images in Western art history is an iteration of a lost painting that neither Botticelli nor anyone else since antiquity has ever seen. Markson's terse fragment on the births of Venus contains a perfect expression of

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[84] *RB*, p. 14.
[85] *VP*, 19.
[86] Ibid., 26.
[87] 'On the Concept', p. 397.
[88] Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 146. Original emphases.
[89] *LN,* p. 118.

afterlife as it is manifested in visual art.[90] Apelles, one of the few ancient Greek painters known by name, enjoyed the patronage of Alexander the Great – none of his artworks survive. It is only through Pliny the Elder's references to Apelles and Lucian's ekphrasis (which we might consider a poetic quotation or translation of the original work) of an allegorical depiction of Calumny that any information about the artist's life and works exist. Having read both Pliny and Lucian, Botticelli 'aspired to' a similar position as Alexander's 'sole court painter', and his celebrated – and very much extant – *Birth of Venus* is an '[attempt] to reconstruct' Apelles's famous work.[91] Despite being wholly, materially lost, Apelles's work endures, first in the ancient fragments that describe it; then, through the rediscovery of these works in the Renaissance, the work survives by becoming something *else* in the entirely new but eminently citational work of Botticelli: the original reaches its 'continued stage of life'. Although Botticelli based his *Venus* on textual sources, the absence of Apelles's original suggests that it be viewed as a visual response to Benjamin's exhortation to 'read what was never written', or rather, 'see what was never seen'.[92] The three forms of afterlife I have outlined in the section above culminate in a dialectic of the fragment, whereby points of absence and presence, as well as loss and recovery, in which destruction provides the conditions for survival.

1.6 Dialectic of the Fragment

As Benjamin asserts, the afterlife of a work does not owe its existence to the original; rather, the original owes its existence to the afterlife. This means that the temporality of the afterlife is not a continuous one, but is marked by gaps, interventions, interruptions, and resurgences in which the renewed life carries traces of the original, but importantly, is radically non-identical to the original. Benjamin emphasises the fundamental alterity of the afterlife when

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[90] It is at this point necessary to note that Benjamin borrowed the term *Nachleben* from Aby Warburg, who coined the expression to describe his study of art history and iconography, beginning with an analysis of Renaissance art called *das Nachleben der Antike* ('the afterlife of antiquity'). Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* is considered the visual equivalent of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. For a fuller account of Warburg's influence on Benjamin and the development of *Nachleben* 'as an art historical category', see Gerhard Richter, *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 2-3. Richter's fantastic work also explores Benjamin's concept of afterlife, but as part of a wider framework of 'afterness' that also includes Heidegger and Derrida.

[91] David Bellingham, 'Aphrodite Deconstructed: Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* in the National Gallery, London', *Brill's Companion to Aphrodite,* ed. by Amy C. Smith and Sadie Pickup (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 347-374 (p. 365).

[92] "Read what was never written," runs a line in Hofmannsthal. The reader one should think of here is the true historian.' Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', *SW* 4, pp. 401-411, p. 405. Subsequent references shortened to 'Paralipomena'.

he remarks that 'the translation [aims] at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one'.[93] This alterity can be seen in the way a quotation takes on startlingly 'other' meanings than the ones inhered by the author of the original text; or the way the words in ancient fragments cross over the gaps left by missing text and bond to form new, poetic configurations.

While the blank spaces between Markson's lines indicate the absence of any exposition that might link them, the reader scans these lines as if they had always appeared in this order, both intuiting and eliding this absence. Fragments give us no choice but to 'read what was never written' in 'the afterlife of works'.[94] Markson's narrators are fascinated with lost works, unearthed masterpieces, and physical fragments, including Sappho's poetry, of which, one narrator exclaims, 'fewer than seven hundred lines remain out of probably twelve thousand.'[95] Halfway through *Reader's Block*, Markson writes: 'Now and again, a fragment, still, flitting through Protagonist's consciousness?'[96] More than any other, this sentence underwrites the substance of Markson's late project. The phrase 'now and again' signals the structure of the novels, which introduce anecdotes, unattributed quotations, decontextualized lines from poems or novels whose significance is only revealed in the duration of the narrative – 'now' and then 'again'. For instance, Markson reproduces the following: 'Severn lift me up, I am dying. Don't breathe on me, it comes like ice.' – without informing the reader that these were Keats's last words.[97] One page later, Markson includes a single address, without context: '26 Piazza di Spagna', which happens to be the location of the Keats-Shelley Memorial House. The attentive reader may feel they are onto something, but this thread soon vanishes. On the same page, a fragment mentions '[a] copy of the *Iliad* that [Alexander the Great] carried in a jewelled chest contain[ing] emendation in Aristotle's handwriting'.[98]

Not only do these two fragments appear unrelated, they are separated by other fragments – about Laurence Sterne's corpse, a quote by Xenophanes about oxen, an unattributed Latin quotation ('*Tolle lege, tolle lege*', or 'take up and read' – St. Augustine), and others. Several pages later, another fragment appears: 'Biographers who conclude at the

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[93] 'Task', pp. 258-259.
[94] Benjamin, 'Paralipomena', p. 405.
[95] *RB*, p. 117.
[96] Ibid., p. 137.
[97] Ibid., p. 11.
[98] Ibid., p. 12.

death of their subjects and do not at least briefly address their survivors', followed immediately by: 'Joseph Severn, who would remain in Rome throughout most of the next six decades. Eventually serving as British Consul.'[99] Nearly a hundred pages later, another fragment appears: 'The books Shelley had with him when he drowned were a Keats and a Sophocles'.[100] A few pages further, and an interpolation by the narrator laments, 'Nothing now, but my books', a refrain that will accrue significance as the novel progresses.[101] Toward the end of the novel, the narrator seems to gather all of the above fragments – last words, last books, knowledge of survivors – when he mournfully asks: 'Why does it sadden Reader to realize he will almost certainly never know what books will turn out to be the last he ever read? What piece of music, the last he ever heard?'[102] Neither of these questions can be objects of experience or self-knowledge; finality, the ultimate end of things – life itself or indeed the end of history – is not something that can be known from the standpoint of history, whose remit is only what has come before and of which we constitute the 'after'.

Amid the lines I have just drawn between these particular fragments, which at first appear to be non-sequiturs but grow into meaning through a kind of non-identical repetition, are hundreds of other disjointed, contracted narratives. Thus, not only do they take the form of terse, ascetic fragments, but their narrative development is also scattered, occurring within a fragmented temporality of reading. 'Now and again […] still' perfectly describes this intermittent temporality, emphasising both motion and stasis. Markson deploys the fragment on several levels: the books themselves are composed wholly of fragments, short sentences that never exceed more than four or five lines; and while these fragment-sentences could have been arranged in a linear order, each line supplementing and clarifying the other, the narrative is itself fragmented – each sentence interrupts the miniature narrative of the one that follows it. Furthermore, Markson portrays the fragmentation of the aging narrator's mind, in which memories leak into the text and jostle one another; further still, he refers to the fragmentation of the body, alluding to the narrator's hospitalisations, physical pain, even his threadbare shirts and ragged jeans. In addition to this, the subject of many of these fragments is the physical fragment, such as the *'Nike of Samothrace,* in the Louvre, which was excavated in 1863 – in more than one hundred fragments'.[103] Clearly, the degrees of

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[99] Ibid., p. 52.
[100] Ibid., p. 107.
[101] Ibid., p. 19.
[102] Ibid., p. 181.
[103] *RB,* p. 117; *TL,* p. 61. This is not the only definition of the works that Markson provides; exactly 'what' the novels are, Markson constantly revises, allowing them to occupy a profusion of indeterminate definitions.

fragmentation are themselves dizzyingly fragmented; and although I have referred to the fragment as a form of afterlife throughout this chapter, it is necessary to provide a more detailed account of the fragment as such in order to unpack the many modalities it takes in Markson's texts: the literary fragment, which we may consider to be Markson's gnomic sentences; the physical fragment, to which he often refers; and the active fragmentation of form.

The 'philological acceptation' of the fragment that Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe note in *The Literary Absolute*, recalls 'the crucial link between the ancient model and the fragmentary state of many of the texts of Antiquity'.[104] Although these fragments mark a form of survival, the fragment and the concept of fragmentation are rarely figured in the restitutive terms with which I have characterised 'the afterlife of works'. Fragments are associated with natural disaster, political catastrophe, general abandonment and decay. Fragments signify loss and decline; they are *lacking* the whole to which they mutely refer, and their original context can neither be placed nor replaced. In this sense, there is a melancholy texture to fragments: they 'miss' the words they were once attached to and as such are inherently mournful objects, placing Markson's work in range of baroque tropes of death. The British and German Romantics responded to the ancient fragment by completely reinventing it, turning its conceptual premise on its head. Instead of a point severed from a vanished whole, the Romantic literary fragment would be an autonomous and 'isolated' work of art, not materially and metaphysically incomplete but fundamentally *whole*. Commenting on Schlegel's dictum that 'the fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog,' Charles Rosen writes that the hedgehog/Romantic fragment 'projects into the universe precisely by the way it cuts itself off.'[105] Dalia Nassar reminds us that '[w]hile the ancient fragment is bequeathed to us as such, a modern fragment is […] intentionally open-ended and resists final meaning or closure.'[106] Markson's fragments are situated somewhere in between the ancient or philological fragment and the literary fragment.

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[104] Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 42.
[105] Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995; repr. 1998), p. 48.
[106] Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy, 1795-1804* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 75.

Conceptually, the fragment is thus the locus of tension between the indestructible afterlife of works, multiplied each time it is divided, and the political violence that underlies fame and artistic canonization (remember Schopenhauer's martyrs). Following Benjamin, historical understanding requires us to recognise, which is to say, read, both states of this tension. The fragment signifies the ultimate survival and living-after of a work, even if it is in pieces or patched together from quotations; indeed, it is this partial state that attests to its endurance in change. The act of fragmentation divides, disperses, and scatters the contents of a work like seeds, enabling it to grow into new contexts and form new relations; it becomes, to slightly modify Andrew Benjamin's phrasing, something other than what it once was. The fragment acts as a witness to the politics of its original reception and the forces that caused its decay or decline and makes this political dimension legible. As the remainders of decay and destruction, fragments are the very signification of survival. Yet, if, as remainders, they are vibrant talismans of a continued form of life, they are also *reminders* of catastrophes and disintegrations to come. This is the dialectic of the fragment, in which absence points in the direction of presence and presence points toward absence. It is neither a transcendent triumph of life over death, nor is it a nihilistic evacuation of hope. Samuel Weber's remarks on Benjamin's translation essay are instructive here: the afterlife 'take[s] us from the notion of life through that of death toward a strange kind of hybrid'; and 'the history that emerges out of this discussion […] is a history that is mindful of mortality, a history that does not try to overcome or transfigure finitude.'[107]

Markson's reader-narrator is acutely mindful of mortality, constructing a contrapuntal movement between images of survival:

> The Laocöon was come upon by workmen digging in a vineyard not far from the Colosseum in 1506. In no time, Michelangelo was at the scene. And identified it at once, from descriptions in the elder Pliny.[108]

And images of transience:

> The Colossus of Rhodes crashed down in an earthquake in 224 B.C. Fully three centuries later Pliny the Elder would comment on the monstrous bronze fragments that still lay about the harbour.

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[107] Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 67-68.
[108] *RB*, p. 79.

[…]

Chares of Lindus.

The first quotation above presents an image of survival and historical recognition that follows the redemptive contours drawn around the afterlife: an excavation delivers a great work (a work which we should not forget is known for its representation of intense human suffering) as if it had been gestating under the earth. In this fragment, an artwork is 'identified […] at once' based on the citational iterations of its 'afterlife'. The latter quotation appears to follow a similar line of thought: one of the wonders of the world, destroyed by natural disaster but surviving in 'monstrous bronze fragments that still lay about the harbor'. However, a few lines down, on the same page, the name 'Chares of Lindus' appears without further context. When single names are mentioned in Markson's work, they belong to a list of deaths shot through the dispersive text. Chares of Lindus (also spelled Lindos) was the Greek sculptor who designed the Colossus of Rhodes. According to Sextus Empiricus, Chares killed himself after discovering an error in his calculations and never saw his project reach completion.[109]

Why does Markson insert the name, 'Chares of Lindus' after the Laocöon fragment, without comment? It is a reminder that fragments can be 'monstrous'; that even as they signal survival they also signify a loss that must also not be forgotten. Whether or not the story of Chares is apocryphal, many are familiar with the Colossus of Rhodes, but few remember the name of its sculptor. The name is so brief that any reader might skim over it to get to the next micro-narrative fragment or to seek a reference with which they are more familiar. This, I think, is the crux of Markson's late work and one of its most resonant intersections with Benjamin's concept of history. Names and images of the dead flash up in the stream of the history and/as narrative, challenging the reader of Markson's work, and Benjamin's reader-as-historian, to recognise them and commit them to remembrance. If this act of recognition and subsequent remembrance does not occur, these images of the past 'flit by', 'never to be seen again'.[110] This does not mean that we have only one chance at historical insight; rather, since history is always becoming something other than it once was, each of these chances is singularly unique and unrepeatable.

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[109] J.J. Pollitt, *The Art of Ancient Greece: Sources and Documents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 110.
[110] 'On the Concept', pp. 390-391.

Markson registers the two poles of the fragment's significance – loss and survival – by 'shuffling' his deck of index cards to reveal an arrangement of fragments that alternate between destruction and redemption. For every image of 'the afterlife of works' contained within Markson's novels, there is another, equally resonant image of death and irrevocable loss, a co-presence which may appear to diminish or even extinguish the redemptive terms with which such an afterlife is articulated. But for Benjamin, redemption is not an eventuality but a *potentiality* that lies within the fragment. It is worth recalling that '*only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of the past*' – for everyone else, it remains incomplete, fragmented, but with a 'weak messianic power'. This is not, however, a cause for despair. As Peter Osborne explains, 'only if the Messianic remains exterior to history can it provide the perspective of a completed whole (without the predetermination of a teleological end) from which the present may appear in its essential transience, as *radically incomplete*'.[111] This incompletion is 'radical' because it leaves history open to the possibility of change and justice rather than regarding it as a closed case.[112] As Benjamin's concept of the afterlife makes clear, history is never closed; indeed, history, by dint of its transformative relationship to the present, has a future.

1.7 Mortification (I): Allegory

So far, I have outlined a theory of the fragment based on its status as a remainder signifying the survival or 'afterlife' of works. This definition of the fragment fits the content of Markson's novels: historical anecdotes and quotations presented in short, disjointed sentences. I want to turn now to the form of these novels and to the issue of fragmentation to which, I argue, Markson subjects the genre of the novel. The act of fragmentation which Markson carries out in the form of his late novels is related to but also quite different to the temporal decay of manuscripts. Clearly, Markson's fragments have not mouldered in the damp of a monastery or been conflagrated by a pope; they are not ancient fragments. What, then, is the source of their fragmentation? The answer to this has two parts, one which can be traced in the setting of *Reader's Block,* and the other is found in Markson's subsequent novel, *This Is Not a Novel. Reader's Block*, the first of Markson's 'last' novels, introduces

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[111] Peter Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time', *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin, Peter Osborne (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 59-109 (p. 89).

[112] 'It is for this reason', Osborne writes, 'that Benjamin does not write of now-time as Messianic *per se,* but only as a 'model' (*Modell*) of the Messianic, 'shot through' with 'chips' of Messianic time, site of a *'weak'* Messianic power. Ibid.

the plethora of deaths and grim anecdotes through the frame of an aging novelist narrator planning a prospective novel – about an aging novelist who lives in the grounds of a cemetery, and whose room is described in terms of a melancholic medieval scholar. *Reader's Block*, I argue, should be seen as Markson's 'baroque' work, in which nature (setting) and history appear together allegorically in the way Benjamin describes the *Trauerspiel*. What is allegorised by the funereal imagery in *Reader's Block* is the novel as such; its narrator calls into question the novel's ability to communicate life. Markson explores this question by experimenting with form, by fragmenting the novel to reveal its ruined structure and examining what remains. Where *Reader's Block* foregrounds the imagery of decomposition, *This Is Not a Novel* inaugurates the de-composition of the novel form.

In the final sections of this chapter, I want to turn to the 'mortification of the work' – a concept derived from Benjamin's early work (his rejected post-doctoral thesis which definitively made him an academic exile) on the baroque German *Trauerspiel* or mourning-play – which, as Bettine Menke indicates, informs the concept of afterlife introduced in the translation essay. So far, I have explored Benjamin's concept of afterlife and its designation of a work's 'continued stage of life'. At first glance, 'the afterlife of works' and their mortification are two antithetical concepts. In fact, afterlife and mortification are interarticulative and mutually constitutive notions that are figured in the fragment and the ruin. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, afterlife is not a form of immortality; in fact, as a form of life, it is a concept that presupposes mortality. In the translation essay, Benjamin further describes the afterlife of works as 'the transformation and renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change', adding that '[e]ven words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process'.

One example Benjamin gives of this 'maturing process' is how certain idioms and expressions which 'sounded fresh once may sound hackneyed later; what was once current may someday sound archaic' – one of the many challenges faced by any translator. Furthermore, Benjamin definitively quashes any question of immortality regarding afterlife when he remarks that 'even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to *perish with its renewal*.'[113] As Menke asserts, 'this constitutes the works' *mortification*' and with it the point where Benjamin's concepts of

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[113] 'Task of the Translator', p. 256.

translation and criticism converge.[114] 'Translation, like "criticism",' Menke clarifies, 'is the mortifying (mode of) "afterlife" of that which remains ruined, dead and disintegrated'.[115] Afterlife therefore has more than one 'mode', one of 'mortification' and one of survival, the exact same dialectic that I have described in relation to the fragment (which is itself a figure of afterlife). Thus, even if afterlife is a form of life defined by history rather than 'organic corporeality', it, too, is subject to mortality; indeed, it is mortality that provides the very conditions of afterlife. Rebecca Comay draws a link between Benjamin's insistence on an expansive conception of life that is 'determined by history rather than by nature' by way of his remarks on the baroque mourning play.[116] Of baroque artists, Benjamin writes, '[n]ature was not seen in bud and bloom, but in the over-ripeness and decay of her creations. In nature they saw eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of this generation recognise history'.[117] This is a conception of history defined not by nature, but 'organic corporeality', a conception in which historical catastrophe is as inevitable and unavoidable as natural disaster.

While Benjamin certainly doesn't promote this stance, it is significant because, as Comay notes, it 'contests the anthropocentric optimism of the Enlightenment […] [and] disturbs the aesthetic plenitude of all idealism'. In other words, the historical teleology of the baroque era indicates the necessity of a (Benjaminian) materialist history that is, to quote Weber once more, 'mindful of mortality'.[118] 'Criticism, writes Benjamin in *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 'is the mortification of the work.' To 'mortify', or critique, a work is to convert the 'material content' into 'truth content'.[119] This mortification provides the 'basis for a rebirth, in which all ephemeral beauty is completely stripped off, and the work

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[114] Bettine Menke, '"However one calls into the forest…": Echoes of Translation' *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism,* ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen (New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 83-97 (p. 96, n.60). Original emphasis.
[115] Ibid., p. 96.
[116] Benjamin, 'Task of the Translator', p. 254-255.
[117] Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 179.
[118] Rebecca Comay, 'Benjamin's Endgame', *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 251-291 (pp. 297-298).
[119] Similarly, translation displaces and de-forms the original into an 'alien language' to reveal the 'truth' of language as an essentially impoverished system of referentiality. Human language, according to Benjamin, aspires to and gestures toward 'the true language' – the 'silent depository of the ultimate secrets for which all thought strives', the language of Paradise in which each word is identical with its meaning, in which words never 'fail'. The true language is an ungraspable linguistic totality which is immanent in all language. Despite and because of this immanence - the radically fragmentary nature of all language – this 'language of truth' 'is concealed in concentrated fashion in translations', a concentration that Benjamin describes elsewhere as a 'seed'. Such a seed marks the potential unfolding of the work's afterlife. 'Task of the Translator', p. 259.

stands as a ruin.'[120] Here, Benjamin establishes mortification as a 'rebirth' – an afterlife – in which 'beauty' is eroded in order that 'the settlement of knowledge in dead [works]' can occur. Criticism arrives at knowledge by dismantling the components of a work which, when united, form an aesthetic experience. Put crudely, criticism 'ruins' literature – although it also occasions the satisfaction that knowledge provides. Markson's novels are the 'settlement of knowledge in dead works' – an accounting of a lifetime of reading and a survey of the total sum of Western literary and cultural production. Through this, Markson enacts a 'rebirth' of the novel – a genre which is consistently declared dead and reborn – as living on 'after' itself. Such an afterlife, however, follows Benjamin's description of criticism as mortification. By offering up a series of novels-as-ruins, Markson offers a mortifying critique of the novel as such, transforming it into an object of knowledge and, in doing so, writes a novel 'after' the novel: a novel that is 'after' the image of the novel, 'like' a novel and as such 'not a novel'; a novel that follows ('after') the novel, pursuing it but never reaching what is both behind (novels before it) and ahead of it (novels to come).

Reader's Block, the 'first' of Markson's last four novels, establishes the type of narrator that will become a feature of the novels to follow: a lonely, isolated, elderly novelist. While plot and character are minimal in *Reader's Block*, they feature more heavily than in the following novels, where literary conventions become progressively more attenuated. The novel introduces Reader, the eponymous narrator, as he proclaims:

> Someone nodded hello to me on the street yesterday.
>
> To me, or to him?
>
> Someone nodded hello to Reader on the street yesterday.[121]

This is one of very few instances where a narrator uses the first-person pronoun, 'me'. In one sense, Markson is drawing playful attention to the act of transposing the autobiographical 'I' to the impersonal fictional third-person pronoun, 'he'; and to the ambiguous but productive relationship between the life of author and character. It also registers the narrator's anxiety about 'put[ting] certain things down', committing the

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[120] *Origins of German Tragic Drama,* trans. by John Osborne (London; New York: Verso, 2003), p. 181. Further references to this work abbreviate the title to *OGTD*.
[121] *RB,* p. 9.

exigencies of old age ('I have been in hospitals. Do I wish to put certain things down?') and the shame of isolation ('Nobody comes. Nobody calls') to print.[122]

In the following sentence, the narrator declares 'Reader has come to this place because he had no life back there at all.'[123] This revision of pronouns, where 'I' becomes 'he', marks the narrator's departure from a life that is at an end, from a life that he considers 'no life' to 'this place', the place of literature. The living 'I' becomes petrified in literature as the subject 'he', inventoried like the other fragments of other lives enclosed within the book. It soon becomes apparent that 'back there' is the narrator's past, [a] life, that was', a life '[w]here there is no now now'.[124] In the novel, the narrator uses the word 'now' predominantly in reference to the time in which the novel is being made or experienced: 'Well, I am completely alone here now', 'Does Reader yet know how long Protagonist has now been alone?', 'Does Reader now have some notion of setting his novel back practically a lifetime ago?', 'He is completely alone here now.'[125] In doing this, Markson is commenting on the 'now' that is actualised in the act of writing and the act of reading, neither of which can occur at the same time. This structure of relation between writer and reader is one of delayed reaction, of belatedness – the temporality of afterlife – that follows but is not restricted to the obscurity and posthumous fame of artists.

In Markson's novels, the death and loss (of works) is explored with at times an 'unmetaphorical' intensity. In the first few interpolations the narrator asks, 'Thumbed pages. Read and read. Who has passed here before me?' There is the suggestion that reading, and the book, are spectral sites that are 'passed over' and 'passed through' at various times by the writer and every reader that has come before it. This applies not just speculatively, but in the case of used books – which physically 'pass hands' and exist tangibly in multiple lives (and lifetimes), Reader's question has a material dimension. As Benjamin writes in his essay on collection, the reader's (or book collector's) 'existence is tied […] to a relationship to objects that […] studies them and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate.'[126] The book has its own fate, its 'encounter' with the reader, but the book itself is a trace of previous

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[122] Ibid., p. 68.
[123] Ibid., p. 9.
[124] Ibid., p. 132.
[125] p. 35; 70; 71; 169
[126] 'Unpacking My Library', p. 486.

readers, and thus becomes the site or 'stage' of fate.[127] As in Benjamin's work, for whom the work of art and decay are dialectically engaged, for Markson there is a relation between reading and death 'staged' by the book that is also manifested in peculiar structure of literary time. Writing enables us to relate to the dead, to a dead author, in ways few other media can. Writing (like death) not only locates a person in a specific place – the printed page an index to the place where it was written – linking the reader to the body of the writer through their corpus; it also contains the writer's voice, their unique linguistic signature. It encapsulates Benjamin's dialectical history wherein an object from the past collides in the present to form the 'now of recognisability' which is the 'now' of reading. Later, the phrase is repeated with a slight variation:

No life back there at all.

What life here, now? [128]

And further on, after 3 more pages:

Nothing now, but my books. [129]

Again, these words describe a state of melancholy absorption that reflects Protagonist's ('I' at a further third remove) situation as a 'guardian of the deceased', lost in the contemplation of dead objects. At one point, Markson quotes a line from Schopenhauer: 'the world is my idea'. He does so without attribution, without quotation marks. In the *Trauerspiel* study, Benjamin writes, 'the theory of mourning […] can only be developed in the description of that world which is revealed under the gaze of the melancholy man'. It is to this world that Reader's 'idea' for a novel belongs, a 'world' without time, where there 'is no now', only 'his books and the graves of strangers'.[130] Graves which, as Sims has pointed out, are analogous to the 'rows' of fragments that comprise the novel. If this is so, what does this

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[127] The influence of *Origins of German Tragic Drama* on 'Unpacking My Library' is easily discernible: like the allegorist, the collector 'lock[s] individual items within a magic circle in which they are frozen as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them. […] the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object.' The book is a 'threshold' object that passes through 'poles of order and disorder'. This essay thus provides a concrete example of both Benjamin's theory of allegory and his notion of afterlife. Incidentally, the book Benjamin relates pursuing is 'the rare *Fragmente aus dem Nachlass eines jungen Physikers* [Posthumous Fragments of a Young Physicist] [by] Joseph Wilhelm Ritter', a novel 'in which the author-editor tells the story of his life in the guise of an obituary for his supposedly deceased unnamed friend – with whom he is really identical'. Ibid., p. 487.
[128] *RB*, p. 16.
[129] Ibid, p. 19.
[130] Ibid., p. 20.

analogy say about writing, about the novel? The dead objects of contemplation in Markson's novels are none other than the detritus of Western civilisation itself; above all, the novel as such. The imagery and landscape of melancholy figure into 'Reader and this notion of his'.[131] Having left 'life back there', Reader contemplates the setting of his novel, wondering how to convey '[a] sense somehow of total retreat? Abandonment?':

> Protagonist living near a disused cemetery, perhaps?
>
> […]
>
> Where precisely would Protagonist live, if near a derelict cemetery? Possibly some sort of structure just within the grounds themselves?
>
> That building abandoned also? [132]
>
> The paths inside are of gravel, or were, long since thinned and scattered.[133]

We can take the thinned and scattered gravel as the paths of interrupted and interruptive narratives. Markson's protagonist 'lives' 'within the grounds themselves', the only stirring body in a field full of silent bodies. As if the decrepitude of this scene wasn't sufficient, even the cemetery is 'derelict' and no longer in use. When the narrator contemplates the surrounding town, he conjures the following scene:

> […] depressed area? Any local industry extinct, stores or even certain private dwellings boarded up?
>
> Surely then conveying a sense almost of recession into the past?[134]

Retreat, abandonment dereliction, and withdrawal from life are tropes associated with melancholy – of medieval hermits, baroque scholar-poets, and the figure of allegorist Benjamin describes in the *Trauerspiel* book. The scene I presented earlier as an analogue to Benjamin's description of the 'unpacking' of his library is worth reiterating, as it ties Markson's Reader (and indeed Benjamin) to the figure of the allegorist:

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[131] Ibid., p. 13.
[132] *RB,* pp. 14-15.
[133] Ibid., p. 18.
[134] Ibid., p. 90.

Protagonist first seen poised abstractedly amid a kind of transitory disarray?

Cartons heaped and piled?

Innumerable books, Reader presumably means?[135]

This morbid quality of Markson's work, his obsession with death and with the gulf, much larger than the space between two lines, that separates the present and the past, recalls the contemplative melancholy of Albrecht Dürer's allegorical scholar in his famous engraving, *Melencolia I* (1514). Dürer's engraving, which has been the subject of countless exegeses and ekphrases (including Benjamin's own), was a Renaissance portrayal of melancholy, the ancient humour associated with Western philosophy since Aristotle. In such a state, the medieval ascetic succumbs to acedia; Dürer's angel gazes out the window, abandoning her tools; Hamlet suicidally ideates with a skull in the palm of his hand. So, too, do Markson's melancholy narrators appear to follow this pattern, which Benjamin describes as 'betray[ing] the world for the sake of knowledge' and 'embrac[ing] dead object [through] contemplation, in order to rescue them'. (Here we can also discern the prehistory of Benjamin's mortifying, messianic criticism). Reader's room is also saturated with melancholy tropes: 'On a shelf beside Reader's desk: a human skull, a reproduction of Giotto's portrait of Dante, two small rough stones'. Over a hundred pages later, an image of Protagonist's room is presented: 'The cemetery framed beyond the window in January light. The skull, lower left foreground, a redundant nearer *memento mori*.'[136] These portraits are charged with a paradoxically dead vitality, the still-life-likeness of a *nature morte*. But they must also be read alongside the contrasting images of restlessness and intellectual agitation presented by the phrase 'transitory disarray.'

Andrea Charise argues that Markson's 'microparagraphs' be viewed as *tableaux vivant*, a popular theatre and parlour act in which a group of stationary players portray a scene; she identifies the tableau's 'contrast between its lively sense of play and the solemnity inherent in stillness.' [137] Although Charise does not mention the scene of 'transitory disarray' quoted above, it is a perfect example of such a tableau. Like the still-life, the stillness of the tableau is disturbed by its modifier – *vivant* – its liveliness and presents an image of

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[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid., p. 185.
[137] Andrea Charise, 'Spots of Future Time: Tableaux, Masculinity, and the Enactment of Aging' *Modern Drama*, 59.2 (Summer 2016), p. 155-176 (p. 156).

precarious stasis vibrating with potential movement. 'Transitory', of course, inheres the dual meaning of impermanence and constant motion, a sense of perpetual arrival – a movement that foregrounds the intermittent structure of Markson's fragments, always arriving at and departing from a new image of history. 'Disarray', meanwhile, indicates a state of disorder – again, anticipating the purposive dis-organisation of Markson's texts. The quality of stillness to this transitory disarray derives from the narrator's description of Protagonist as 'first seen poised abstractedly' – like a player in a *tableau vivant*. As such, this 'tableau' is an image of 'petrified unrest', one of Benjamin's descriptions of allegory that holds particularly true for Reader: 'Whatever is struck by the allegorical intention is severed from the contexts of life: it is at once destroyed and conserved. Allegory holds fast to ruins. It offers the image of petrified unrest.'[138]

It is precisely the point at which Reader is 'severed from the contexts of life' ('no life back there at all') that is the point at which he announces his 'intention' to construct his allegory of the derelict cemetery. Santner reads the image of 'petrified unrest' in similar terms, as a 'paradoxical mixture of deadness and excitation, stuckness and agitation' which, he writes, 'might best by [sic] captured by the term "undeadness".[139] While this reading is eloquent and important, Santner's Lacanian hermeneutics leads him to diagnose this unrest as 'pertain[ing] to the dynamic of the *repetition compulsion*', which he describes as 'the manic side' of melancholy.[140] This interpretation is not without basis, for in *The Arcades Project* Benjamin describes 'petrified unrest' as 'the formula' for a history 'which knows no development', and as such permits a Nietzschean eternal recurrence of events.[141] Santner's solution to this zombified condition is to prescribe the following 'cure': '[t]he *awakening* at issue in the messianic advent should be understood not as a resurrection, an animation of the dead, but […] as a *deanimation of the undead*.'[142] There is not enough space to dissect the complexities of Santner's thesis, but it seems to me that messianic redemption would not involve killing the undead, nor would it involve the implicitly naïve act of resurrection (how can a being that is not dead be resurrected?), rather, it would consist in releasing the life – the source of unrest – contained within the petrified object. Santner's reading of Benjamin is virtuosic, but it emphasises the pessimistic dimension of 'unrest' and elides the potentiality

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[138] Benjamin, 'Central Park', *SW* 4, pp. 161-199 (p. 169).
[139] Santner, p. 81. Original emphasis.
[140] Ibid., p. 80.
[141] *AP*, [J55a,5], p. 329.
[142] Santner, p. 88.

inherent in the concept of unrest. Elsewhere in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin designates 'petrified unrest' as a 'historical' – that is, a dialectical – 'image'.[143] The image of petrified unrest, like the tableau, like the image of Protagonist 'poised […] amid a kind of transitory disarray' represents the moment of dialectical 'standstill' – as stillness 'poised' for action.

The 'compulsion' to collect – fragments, books, quotations – dead or lost objects from history is a compulsion to actively 'unpack' memories, to break solidified narratives down to the points where they are most agitated and insistent. This is the same movement between stillness and motion organised by transience as 'Now and again, a fragment, still, flitting through Protagonist's consciousness?' The meaning of still is left ambiguous and open to two interpretations: one that inheres motionlessness, even a state of arrest; but 'still' can also indicate an event that is 'still occurring' ('now and again'). Still fragments 'still' keep 'flitting' through the narrator's consciousness; not as a repetition compulsion analogous to eternal recurrence but as 'repetition without repetition', as Gerhard Richter characterises afterlife.[144] Markson's form of repetition is also 'without repetition' – characterised by its irregular, unpredictable occurrence; it happens 'now and again'. The still fragments of Reader's are memories that flash up in the moment of reading and arrested in fragments on the page. The petrifying gaze of melancholy is not merely a 'manic' symptom requiring a cure; rather, it is the 'antidote to myth' capable of turning teleological history and illusory linear narratives to stone.

1.8 Mortification (II): Of Works

It is apparent that Markson, writing at the end of one millennium – the late nineties – and the beginning of another, regarded the novel as a genre not 'in bud and bloom', to borrow another of Benjamin's phrases, but in its 'over-ripeness and decay'.[145] While afterlife reveals a work's continued stage of life, it is indexical of and predicated by the death and loss of works. This process occurs with the passing of time, a 'transformation of material content into truth content […] whereby the earlier charms [diminish] decade by decade, into the basis for a rebirth, in which all ephemeral beauty is completely stripped off, and the work stands as a ruin'.[146] The revelation of the work's truth content is comparable to 'the ruins of

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[143] *AP*, [J79,1], p. 367.
[144] Richter, *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics*, p. 173.
[145] *OGTD*, p. 173.
[146] Ibid., p. 182.

great buildings [in which] the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are'.[147] As Ilit Ferber writes, 'death and loss become conditions for the legibility of works […] [i]n states of erosion, ruin, or degradation, something in the material becomes exposed; such a state thus opens the work up to the critical gaze.'[148]

Early in *Reader's Block*, the narrator, sorting through 'his mind full of clutter' and its autobiographical remains, asks, 'What is a novel in any case?' The novel is thus the subject of an investigation whose method will be mortification. In order for the novel to become an object of knowledge, it must be mortified, its 'ephemeral beauty […] stripped off'. The first phase of this mortification is the fragmented form of *Reader's Block*, the preliminary novel in a series of novels which will grow progressively more attenuated. The hypothetical novel with which Reader is occupied can be defined only 'in part':

A novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel?

Also in part a commonplace book?

Also in part a cento, as Burton would surely have had it?

Also in part a distance cousin innumerable times removed of *The Unquiet Grave*?[149]

Also in part a distant cousin innumerable times removed of *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake?*[150]

Also in part a distant cousin innumerable times removed of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*?

Of the cataloguing of Cairo Genizah?[151]

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[147] Ibid., 235.
[148] Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 26.
[149] Markson is referring not to the folk song by the same title but Cyril Connolly's aphoristic collection of occasional work, *The Unquiet Grave: A Word Cycle* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951).
[150] *RB*, p.140
[151] Ibid. p. 166. The Cairo Geniza is a collection of hundreds of thousands of fragments of text - religious, economic, and cultural - buried in the storeroom of a synagogue in Cairo. Cataloguing the Cairo Genizah is notoriously difficult; according to the collection's website, there are 50 existing catalogues compiled since its discovery in 1895, and the manuscript fragments are divided among several institutions and private collections.

The very act of definition rends itself – the narrator can only describe his potential novel in terms adjacent to the novel: what it is 'in part' of and split into parts for: a cento, a funerary text, a commonplace book. The narrator classifies his hypothetical novel, a meta-commentary on the novel at hand, in partite terms: the novel is part commonplace book, part cento, part anthology, part funerary text, part exegesis, part catalogue of ancient fragments. The novel's partial resemblance to commonplace books and centos refers to its 'collage-like' collection of quotations, anecdotes, and facts. The activities of common placing and cento-writing are rooted in scholastic and rhetorical development, both having been used as external mnemonic devices.[152] The traditional seventeenth-century commonplace book was itself of indeterminate genre and 'lay at the intersection between practices of collecting, reading, classifying, learning and the arts of rhetoric', a depository of disparate material from recipes to proverbs and, indeed, quotations. [153] The commonplace book was, like Markson's own novels, a form of writing produced from the act of reading and transcribing, many of which were subsequently published in print: they were principally written by readers, a distinction that resonates with Markson's designation of the narrator as 'Reader' and the title of *Reader's Block* rather than *Writer's Block*. Furthermore, the commonplace book echoes literary modernism's sense of allusiveness and intertextuality – Markson refers to *Reader's Block* as 'an ersatz prose alternative to *The Wasteland*.'[154] The novel's resemblance to Robert Burton's centos is also worth noting: these, too, are difficult to classify in terms of recognisable and established genres. As Stephanie Shirilan writes, the cento is conditioned by 'subversive miscitation and ventriloquism […] transposing a set of sentences or syntagms from one context to another.'[155] Originating in ancient Greek and Roman poetry, the cento, meaning 'patchwork garment', was intended 'to make something new from the authoritative master-text, typically Virgil […] prized for their successful redeployment of the poet's words in wholly different contexts than those found in the original.'[156] This certainly describes (in part) the ways quotation is incorporated into Markson's late texts. Quotation appears here in

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[152] For a fuller discussion of the commonplace book, see Richard Yeo, *Notebooks, English Virtuosi, and Early Modern Science* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2014). The mnemonic quality of the cento is explored in Chapter 5 of M.D. Usher's *Homeric Stitchings: The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), p. 81-100.
[153] Lucia Dacome, 'Noting the Mind: Commonplace Books and the Pursuit of the Self in Eighteenth-Century Britain, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 65.4 (2004), pp. 603-625 (p. 604).
[154] *RB*, p. 101.
[155] Stephanie Shirilan, *Robert Burton and the Transformative Powers of Melancholy* (Surrey; Burlington, Vt.: Routledge, 2015), p. 47.
[156] Ibid.

several forms: unattributed quotations, second-hand quotations, and reported quotations attributed to a speaker, rendered as dialogue: 'Oh, isn't life a terrible thing, thank God? Says Polly Garter', and 'One should always read with a pen in one's hand. Says Delacroix in the *Journals.*'[157] The latter quotation is attributed to the fictional character who speaks it in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*; the former appropriates Delacroix's (writing) voice, reanimating it through the narrator's own voice.

The words of fictional characters of fictional characters and those of dead authors are rearranged and re-vocalised in the same way, shaped by the same structure of dialogue. This gives the reader some clue as to the space and temporality of literature; as objects of creation, fictional lives shuffle between a state of life and something more like lifelessness. Similarly, the words of dead authors reproduced and reassembled on a new page, within the matrix of Markson's novels specifically, are enlivened and re-presented in a new moment of reading; but this renewed presence is transient and always indexical to death, not merely because the writer or speaker of these words is invariably dead in Markson's novels, but also because these fugitive moments of resuscitation are interspersed with fragments focused on the facts of death – its time, place, and cause: 'Gilles Deleuze committed suicide', 'Kay Sage committed suicide', 'Walafrid Strabo drowned in the Loire', among the 450 deaths enumerated in *Reader's Block.*

In the list above, Markson's books are also considered 'in part' funerary text, narrating the journey from death to afterlife. This alternation between lifelessness and vitality is the nexus of Markson's work that links 'mortification', melancholy, loss, quotation and the fragmentary. It also helps to elaborate the relationship between Benjamin's philosophy and Markson's cento-like patchwork of quotations and references. *Reader's Block* focuses on the setting of the novel as a world under the melancholy gaze, filled with baroque signifiers of death and obsolescence, providing an allegory for the novel genre. Under this gaze, the novel becomes, an artefact – an object of knowledge that can be known only in fragments: 'in part'. The pensiveness with which the narrator regards this world is the defining feature of baroque allegory, exhuming the past for remnants and attempting to invest them with meaning.

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[157] *VP*, p. 57; p. 79.

Reader's Block presents a fragmentary allegory of the relation between death and the novel, which reveals itself as an object of knowledge in decay. In his second late work, *This is Not a Novel,* 'mortification' is taken one step further, as the narrator (Writer) states a clear intention to reduce the novel to its barest components and present the novel at its zero point. The novel begins with the lines:

Writer is pretty much tempted to quit writing.

Writer is weary unto death of making up stories.

[…]

Writer is equally tired of inventing characters.[158]

This novel (which insists it is 'not a novel') features, again, an elderly novelist, this time called Writer. This disenchantment leads Writer to 'contrive' '[a] novel with no intimation of story whatsoever. And no characters. None.'[159] Clearly, *This is Not a Novel* marks a break with the distinct outlines of plot and character in *Reader's Block*. There is no Protagonist manifesting from the hypothetical novel Writer is in the midst of writing, 'simplif[ying]', as Francoise Palleau-Papin notes, 'the complexity' of the 'trinity formed by "I", Reader, and Protagonist into the unified voice of a writing character.'[160] Writer is de-composing the novel:

Actionless, writer wants it.

Which is to say, with no *sequence of events.*

Which is to say, with no *passage of time*.

Then again, getting somewhere in spite of this.

[…]

A novel with no setting.

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[158] *NN*, p. 1.
[159] *NN*, p. 2.
[160] Palleau-Papin, p. 250.

With no so-called furniture.

Ergo meaning finally without *descriptions*.[161]

Here, Writer, the single protagonist of *This is Not a Novel*, finds himself at his limits with (the limits of) writing, unable to endure or even, apparently, outlive it. The allegorical landscape of *Reader's Block* is gone; now, the narrator is paradoxically 'contriving' a non-representational novel. Markson has thus moved from a surfeit of partial definitions of *Reader's Block* toward the formal de-composition of the novel by stripping away its most communicative components. In *This is Not a Novel,* Markson erases all the characteristics of the novel that are mimetic of life – character, plot, time, setting – and emphasises the novel as a fundamentally lifeless, 'contrived' form by presenting a novel that is self-reflexively constructed and 'collage-like'. Yet the faint outlines of everything Writer prohibits protrude from every fragment in the novel, each a fugitive, miniature narrative.

The above descriptions of Writer's novel are all negative: 'no', 'none', 'without' – Writer never positively describes what the novel (which 'is not a novel') 'is' except to imply that there may be something irreducibly communicative about writing that isn't predicated on traditional narrative mechanisms: 'getting somewhere in spite of this'. But getting where? Like *Reader's Block, This is Not a Novel* and Markson's last two novels contain hundreds of discrete, but often intersecting, anecdotes, legends, historical curiosities, facts and figures, all of which suggest, at various points, sequences of events, the passage of time, settings and descriptions – though none of these elements coincide in one fragment, and the formal unity that characterises the novel genre remains elusive: The Novel is immanent in *This is Not a Novel*. But the transcendent unity of the novel form is prohibited. While *Reader's Block* presented a ruined 'setting', *This is Not a Novel* reveals the novel form as a ruin, missing most of its distinguishing generic features and speaking only of an 'idea for a plan' for a novel.

In her analysis of Markson's work, Laura Sims writes that despite the narrator's 'assertion that he exists as an author, Writer remains confined to the pages as a character thinking about writing a book', thereby subverting 'Writer's genre-busting dreams'.[162] While I agree that this work does not fulfil the speculative criteria of its narrator, I do want

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[161] *TNN*, pp. 2-3. Original emphasis.
[162] Sims, 'David Markson and the Problem of the Novel', *New England Review* 29.3 (2008) <http://cat.middlebury.edu/~nereview/29-3/Sims-Markson.htm> [accessed 9 July 2016]

to take Writer's attempt to subtract elements from the novel – to chip away at generic conventions in order to reveal its true potential – seriously. For Sims, it is the 'emotionally satisfying', 'compulsively readable' element of Markson's work which 'wisely' avoids 'destroying the genre altogether'.[163] However, if we take the title seriously, we must contend with the fact that it *is not a novel,* it is 'something else' altogether; and that what it presents is the other of the novel. This 'other' novel is both the novel at hand and the novel the character, Writer, is 'writing'. Only through the mortification of the novel can the novel become an object of knowledge, a critical object capable of an afterlife. The novel lives on in Markson's late work, but in an altered, refracted form.

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[163] Ibid., n.p.

Chapter Two

Dialectic of the Valance: Aura, Trace, and Allegory in the Poetry of Susan Howe

> There is a mystic separation between poetic vision and ordinary living. The conditions for poetry rest outside each life at a miraculous reach indifferent to worldly chronology.
>
> Trust absence, allegory, mystery – the setting not the rising sun is beauty.
>
> – Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*[1]

> 'The task of criticism is not to lift the veil but rather, through the most precise knowledge of it as a veil, to raise itself for the first time to the view of the beautiful. To the view that will […] only imperfectly open itself to the view of the beautiful of that which is secret. Never yet has a true work of art been grasped other than when it is ineluctably represented itself as a secret'
>
> – Walter Benjamin, 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*'[2]

In the preceding chapter, I read Markson's late novels as a literary account of the concept of *Nachleben*, or afterlife, the term Benjamin gives to the form of survival of an original moment, object, or work as it passes away into and is transformed by history. By the same turn, I argue that Markson's novels can themselves be considered as literary afterlives of Benjamin's unfinished *The Arcades Project* and emphasise the textual terms with which Benjamin constructs his philosophy of history. Markson's account of 'the afterlife of works' is organised around the form and content of the fragment whose restlessness – oscillating between the two poles of destruction and survival – posits a messianic structure of literary time, capable of bringing the reader to a dialectical standstill. At the same time, this formal fragmentation entails an active 'mortification' of the novel form itself. Markson's novels discard the 'furniture' of the novel as such – description, plot, and character – focusing instead on errant anecdotes, facts, quotations, and references, just as Benjamin's *Arcades Project* dispenses with commentary and 'ingenious formulations' in favour of 'the rags [and] the refuse' of history.[3] The fragment acknowledges loss but holds open, through its cracks and ruptures, the possibility of redemption through remembrance and survival through the

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[1] Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions, 1985; repr. 2007), p. 13.
[2] Benjamin, 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*', *SW* 1, pp. 297-360 (p. 351).
[3] Markson, *NN*, p. 5; Benjamin, *AP*, [N1a,8], p. 460.

transfiguration, or translation, that memory enacts. By reducing the novel to something other than it once was, Markson's late work provides one iteration of the novel's own afterlife: a novel that is 'not a novel' – a novel 'after' the novel. This 'mortification' of the novel results in a series of 'perilous critical moment[s] upon which', Benjamin writes, 'all reading is founded.'[4] The interruptive, disjunctive structure of Markson's novels conforms to the temporality of authentic time and demands a correlative model of reading with which history might be properly recognised, or 'read'. Markson's works highlight the fundamental belatedness inherent in the act of reading and accentuate the critical moment of recognition that occurs 'after' reading. This model of reading both *produces* and is *required by* Benjamin's idiosyncratic materialist historiography. Put more simply, one must read this way in order to write history and to interpret it.

In this chapter, I want to follow through this idea of reading, its asynchronous structure, and its distinctive relation to disintegration, destruction, revelation and survival. Susan Howe, a poet whose work spans over forty years, is equally, if not more, fascinated by the 'afterlife of works'. Many of my observations about Markson's work obtain for Howe. I will not rehearse these except to demarcate points of difference between each writer. Both Howe and Markson are methodologically propelled by reading: they are collectors of source material that is inextricably linked to the production of their works. This production is always associated with mortality and forms of loss. Loss precipitates and is mediated by the desire to connect the stray histories and disparate narratives that populate their works; yet brokenness remains, and nothing can be said to have been strictly repaired – the damage cannot be erased, and any attempt to do so would be a lapse in ethical judgement. The recognition of this brokenness, of the gaps and fractures in intellectual, artistic, and historiographical traditions, provides the very conditions under which author and reader (and these terms are not absolutely discrete) may both testify to this damage and – at least partially – re-collect and re-connect memories in a more redemptive configuration.

However, it is in their approaches to these gaps that Howe and Markson can be distinguished. Whereas Markson installs his fragments in rigid rows demarcated by blank spaces (like gravestones, to cite Laura Sims once more), Howe is much more dynamic in the way that she uses the space of the page: her work is often a mixture of essayistic prose, traditional verse formats, photographs, and, often, lines of text that intersect one another in

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[4] Benjamin, *AP*, [N3,1], p. 463.

a meticulously chaotic arrangement. Both authors utilise fragmentation, unusual line breaks, collection and collage techniques to figure the discontinuity of history (and history's discontinuities). Like Markson, Howe is interested in forgotten texts and writers, cultural amnesia and the material fragment. Unlike Markson – who, for all his concern for what is lost and erased by history, predominantly engages with great works by great men – Howe is emphatically fixated on narratives that are subordinated by colonial violence and the gendered erasure of women's voices. Thus, while Markson's rich and affective work is a remarkable formulation and elaboration of the concept of afterlife, Howe's work explicitly responds to the ethical demands posed by Benjamin's historical materialism, which maintains that '*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.'[5] In this chapter, I seek to uncover the messianic dimensions of language, reading, and the material object in Howe's poetry, which I understand as a redemptive but critical project. For Howe, poetry is both of mode of transmitting history in a way that attempts to counteract the erasures of the archive *and* a form that is receptive to transmissions from 'outside of worldly chronology.' Poetry, for Howe thus occupies a space between scholarly and prophetic forms of historical understanding.

2.1 The Task of Transmission

When Susan Howe writes in *The Birth-mark* (1993), a poetic-critical investigation of early American literature, 'I know records are compiled by winners, and scholarship is in collusion with Civil Government' she is suggesting an ethics of historical inquiry that Walter Benjamin's own, much-cited words in 'On the Concept of History':

> There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.[6]

I am not the first to link this quotation to Howe's work. Mandy Bloomfield and Rachel Tzvia Back both draw a connection between Benjamin's exhortation to 'brush history against the grain' and Howe's poetic project. Back writes that Howe and Benjamin share a 'passionate

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[5] Benjamin, 'On the Concept', p. 391. Original emphases.
[6] Howe, *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 4; 'On the Concept', p. 392.

interest in history, the insistence that the past must be read and written differently – must be "brush[ed] against the grain" – the understanding of one's own world through its figurative and literal topography, and the refusal to conform to genre limits and genre norms.'[7] Alluding to Back, Bloomfield notes that it is 'not just to read the past differently but to engage with history in all its materiality' and emphasises the 'mode of physical engagement [that] is played out quite literally in many of Howe's poems.'[8] However, neither critic provides a sustained examination of the similarities (or differences) between Howe and Benjamin beyond remarking on their joint assault on positivist history, and their shared desire to rescue or redeem it through motifs of interruption and discontinuity. This, too, is my starting point, but I wish to unpack it further with reference to Benjamin's concept of nonsensuous similarity, aura, and allegory. Benjamin's rightly famous passage, quoted above, crosses several reference points for Howe's poetry: first, it figures history in terms of textuality, that is to say, history can (potentially) be read; second, it is concerned with the transmissibility of history, the possibility of communicating the past – and of receiving the past – in language; third, it emphasizes the materiality of history – the task of the historian is to 'brush' it 'against the grain'.[9] I want to focus on the first two terms, textuality and transmissibility, before turning the status of materiality in Howe's work later in this chapter. In doing so, I hope to provide a clear, though not systematic, account of Howe's poetic method.

As Drake Stutesman writes, Howe's work is intensely engaged with 'the nature of documentation, of documents themselves and how history is configured in our imaginations by documents (or lack of them).'[10] Howe's poetry is generated from material in the archive,

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[7] Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe*, p. 60. See especially Chapter 3, 'Brushing History against the Grain: A Reading of *The Liberties* and *Pythagorean Silence*'. While Back uses Benjamin as an entry point to her readings of Howe but draws exclusively on 'On the Concept' and does not go into great depth exploring the conceptual and theoretical crosscurrents in Benjamin's and Howe's work, despite the chapter's title.

[8] Mandy Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics: Word, Image, History*, p. 57.

[9] As I have mentioned throughout this thesis, Benjamin repeatedly casts his philosophy of history in terms of textuality. Though his conception of history is by no means restricted to texts, it is grounded in the conviction that history and language are co-emergent, a point elaborated in Benjamin's early essay 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man'. I will return to this essay, and its usefulness for understanding Howe's own account of language, later in this chapter. For now, it is enough to say that history is communicated through language (history is discursively constructed) and encoded *in* language (every word has a history), and that this relationship between language and history is one that Howe's poetry both struggles to negotiate and attempts to overcome.

[10] Drake Stutesman, 'Without Words, What Are Facts? Looking at Susan Howe Looking at Marker', *Framework*, 53.2 (Fall 2012), pp. 429-466 (p. 429).

from the 'tainted' documents of civilisation/barbarism. Her work is always 'ground[ed]' in the 'particulars' of the archive:

> In my case this usually means a material object such as a book, or a manuscript […] Often a historical moment, or a specific person […] [such as] Esther Johnson, Emily Dickinson, Mary Rowlandson, Hope Atherton, Anne Hutchinson, Thomas Shepard, Clarence Mangan, Herman Melville, Charles and Juliet Peirce—the only way for me to reach them, or for them to reach me, is through the limited perspective of documents.[11]

In her introduction to *The Birth-mark*, Howe writes: 'I am drawn toward the disciplines of history and literary criticism but in the dawning distance a dark wall of rule supports the structure of every letter, record, transcript.'[12] The 'document universe' of the archive is thus 'tainted' by 'the manner in which it was transmitted'.[13] Benjamin and Howe are thus faced with the same difficult 'task': to develop an alternative mode of transmission for history that no longer empathises with 'the victor' when the documents are 'tainted'.[14] One such mode, Howe suggests, is poetry: '[if] history is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices'.[15] Bloomfield aptly observes that Howe's decision to capitalize 'Poetry' and to leave 'history' in lowercase letters 'amounts to a challenge to the authority of history and a claim for the value of a specifically poetic mode of historical investigation.'[16] Howe suggests that, in contrast to the discipline of history, poetry (with a capital 'P') is able to circumvent some of the 'barbarism' that 'taints' historical discourse. Yet Howe also acknowledges the impossibility of rescuing everything that is occluded by the historical record, or of redeeming history in any absolute way. In an essay from *The Birth-mark* entitled 'Incloser', Howe writes anxiously of her poetic method: 'by choosing to install certain narratives somewhere between history, mystic speech, and poetry, I have enclosed them in an organization, although I know there are places no classificatory procedure can reach, where connections between words and things we thought existed break off.'[17] This account foregrounds the

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[11] Howe, interviewed by Jon Thompson, 'Interview with Susan Howe', *Free Verse: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, 9 (Winter 2005) <www.freeversethejournal.org/Archives/Winter_2005/interviews/S_Howe.html> [accessed 12 May 2018]
[12] *The Birth-mark*, p. 4.
[13] Howe, *The Midnight* (New York: New Directions, 1985; repr. 2007) p. 60. Subsequent references to *The Midnight* will be shortened to *TM*.
[14] 'On the Concept', p. 392.
[15] *The Birth-mark*, p. 14.
[16] Bloomfield, p. 38.
[17] Howe, 'Incloser', *The Birth-mark,* p. 45.

central characteristics and concerns of Howe's work. First, it demarcates the generic heterogeneity of Howe's poetry, which is situated at the crosscurrents of historical practice, mysticism and theology, the lyric, and prose. Second, it registers the dialectical tension between acts of rescue and entrapment: plucking 'certain narratives' from within (and without) the archive and inserting them into a text 'lift[s] them from the dark side of history', but also restricts them to a singular form of 'organization'.[18] Commenting on the same passage, Stephen Collis adeptly notes that 'every writer does enclose and print binds and limits at the same time as it preserves and bestows.'[19] Howe writes: 'Knowledge, no matter how I get it, involves exclusion and repression. […] When we move through the positivism of literary canons and master narratives, we consign ourselves to the legitimation of power, chains of inertia, an apparatus of capture.'[20]

Yet, Howe adds, 'there are places no classificatory procedure can reach' – this is the third movement of her poetics of enclosure.[21] It is not just that systems of knowledge exclude objects that are not easily assimilated into their structures, but that these marginal objects actively resist this assimilation. In doing so, these objects attest to the limits and fragility of repressive epistemologies. As Norman Finkelstein writes, 'the site of [this] struggle is the archive, where conflicting ideologies are expressed both *in* the texts, often antique and obscure, and *as* texts, born again into new poems from the suppressions and detritus of the past.'[22] Furthermore, the 'places' 'no classificatory procedure can reach' are those 'where connections between words and things we thought existed break off.'[23] This last clause reflects the account of language that informs Howe's richly polysemous and associative work. If, as Will Montgomery remarks, the 'places' Howe speaks of here 'are the places of her poems too', then we must also regard them as the place of language.[24] According to Howe, language itself holds something unassimilable at its core: '[…] at the heart of

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[18] Howe, 'THERE ARE NOT LEAVES ENOUGH TO CROWN TO COVER TO CROWN TO COVER', *The Europe of Trusts* (New York: New Directions, 1990), p. 14. Original capitalisation.
[19] Stephen Collis, *Through the Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism* (Victoria, B.C.: English Literary Studies Editions, 2006), p. 50.
[20] 'Incloser', p. 45.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Norman Finkelstein, *On Mount Vision: Forms of the Sacred in Contemporary American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), p. 114. Original emphasis.
[23] 'Incloser', p. 45.
[24] Will Montgomery, *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 47. Montgomery's study is one of the most comprehensive and rigorously thoughtful resources on Howe's work.

language lies what language can't express.'[25] The moment that eludes the 'classificatory procedure' – which Howe associates with the entanglement of the archive, historical positivism, patriarchy, and American colonialism – is the moment where the signifying power of language breaks off. But this breakage cannot be considered as the suspension of language (a sort of linguistic state of emergency), for it occurs *within* language and through the poetic text. Therefore, we must not read Howe as iconoclastically breaking or breaking free of language, although this is a credible and tested interpretation: Ming-Qian Ma deftly asserts that Howe's is 'an iconoclastic rescue mission […] to break free from grammar as "repressive mechanism," and to resist being captured and silenced by meaning.'[26] Similarly, Back suggests that Howe 'enacts language's liberation, its release from the bonds of syntax, word units, and normative use of page space.'[27] Like Montgomery, who reads Howe's writing 'to be greatly colored by forms of constraint', I do not believe Howe's poetry performs the wholesale liberation of language.[28] As Howe states in her interview with Edward Foster, 'I think a lot of my work is about breaking free […] Starting free and being captured and breaking free again and being captured again.'[29] While Montgomery suggests that 'Howe's own accounts of her writing, particularly in interviews, can sometimes hinder' the analysis of her poems, I believe Howe's statement here is instructive of the dialectical movement between breaking free of language and being 'captured' by it which informs the account of language that her poetry embodies.[30] I understand her poetry not so much as obliterating the constraints of language as making visible the inherent brokenness of language by attending to moments where language – and the archive – exceeds itself.

Howe examines and is fascinated by the poetry of Emily Dickinson, largely unknown in her own lifetime and whose outsider status, to a certain extent, still remains; the transcripts of the trial of Anne Hutchinson, a Puritan whose religious enthusiasm threatened the social order of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and which led to her banishment and exile; Mary Rowlandson, author of the first 'captivity narrative' in the United States, and whose ambiguous and highly edited account of capture and ransom during King Phillip's War

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[25] 'Scare Quotes I', *TM*, p. 70.
[26] Ming-Qian Ma, 'Articulating the Inarticulate: Singularities and the Counter-Method in Susan Howe', *Contemporary Literature,* 36.3 (Autumn 1995), pp. 466-489 (p. 471). Howe is, of course, deeply preoccupied with the history and notion of Puritan iconoclasm, but she reads it as a displacement of the image by the word, whose sensuous material and divine qualities take on iconic dimensions.
[27] Back, p. 56.
[28] Montgomery, p. 81.
[29] Howe, interviewed by Edward Foster, '*Talisman* interview', *The Birth-mark*, p. 166. Subsequent references shortened to 'Foster interview'.
[30] Montgomery, p. 80.

(1675-1678) Howe reads as a contradictory document of American exceptionalism; the existential graphs of the pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce; and the silent or silenced wives of canonical authors like Stella Swift, Juliet Pierce, Elizabeth Shaw Melville, or Samuel Taylor Coleridge's daughter Sarah, each of whom occupies a space in the margins or footnotes of their husbands' and fathers' archives. Howe is very much aware of her complicity in the 'barbarism' of which Benjamin speaks by her perusal and production of 'documents of civilisation': 'Predominance pitched across history/ Collision or collusion with history'.[31] As a white woman writing about American history, Howe is conscious that 'I am/ Part of their encroachment', 'My ancestors tore off/ the first leaves/ picked out the best stars'.[32] Rather than fully 'dissociate' from the archive, however, Howe attempts to detect the signals transmitted from elsewhere, to find the shape of a mode of transmission that does not favour 'the winners'. While the authority of the archive and systems of knowledge is powerful, it is also mutable within its own context. Howe is interested in the residuum left over from the 'classificatory procedure' because it disrupts the notion that all knowledge can be contained in a totality; her poetic project is concerned with inscribing those singularities of the archive – these are both points of divergence from classificatory logic, and the experience of history as an actuality – as she does with James Clarence Mangan and Melville's Bartleby in 'Melville's Marginalia'. Howe translates these singularities into her poetic syntax, focusing on hesitations, stutters, illegible marks and dashes on the graphic surface of the page.[33] One prototype for this typographic arrest is Emily Dickinson's unusual punctuation, particularly the dash, which has famously befuddled her editors. Howe interprets these dashes as a 'hush of hesitation for breath and for breathing', investing silence with expressive potentiality.[34]

This also takes the form of unfinished sentences, as well as fragments of text taped over one other so that only a portion of the text can be read, leaving the rest is illegible. These arrests the hold of sequential, progressive thought and foreclose the possibility of a universal, univocal interpretation. On one hand, the dash gestures towards the mystery of the

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[31] Howe, 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time', *Singularities* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press; Hanover, NH: University of New England, 1990), pp. 1-38 (p. 33.)

[32] 'Thorow', *Singularities*, pp. 39-60 (p. 47, p. 52). As Bloomfield astutely notes, the paratactic arrangement of this poem, characteristic of Howe's verse in general, shares some of the same 'formal and thematic concerns' with Benjamin's texts, particularly of *The Arcades Project* and 'On the Concept', likening its syntax to the 'standstills' and arrests that mark the dialectical image. See Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics,* p. 57.

[33] Benjamin defines the dialectical image as 'the caesura in the movement of thought' that interrupts the continuity of historicism in *AP*, [N10a,3], p. 475.

[34] Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Direction, 1985; repr. 2007), p. 23

unspoken and unutterable; it attests to the fact that not everything can be contained in language. On the other hand, it can indicate the pause before the breaking of silence, the breath taken in before speaking. The dash provides the space for multiple attachments and connections even as it fractures discourse. The idea of the dash is one way of seeing the two poles at work in Howe's poetry, which open up a space 'between' articulation and inarticulation. Howe describes this as 'the instance of balance between silence, seeing, and saying: the moment before speech'.[35]

In the dedicated body of Howe criticism, nearly every scholar and reviewer remarks upon the 'strangeness' of Howe's work. Charles Bernstein's review describes *That This* as a 'characteristically strange and unsettling volume'; Rebecca Ariel Porte draws a comparison between Howe's 'strange poetics' and the filmmaker Chris Marker, the subject of Howe's *Sorting Facts* (1996).[36] In his study of Howe's poetry, Montgomery describes Howe's work as strange several times, from the 'strangely textured poetic landscape of *The Midnight*' to a more general 'quality of strangeness that pervades Howe's poem[s] and the way it articulates literary relationships'.[37] In each case, and in its general usage, 'strange' designates something unknown, unfamiliar and undefinable and, again, *unassimilable* into critical exegesis. Howe's project is paradoxical in that it attempts to represent absence and articulate silence – not through ventriloquism or an inflated sense of speaking 'for' the dead – but by seeking to find the sounds and forms that absence paradoxically takes. In an effort to wrench power from the 'winners', she invests silence with a certain expressive agency, even if that silence only expresses the fact of its suppression in the archive. The 'absolute absence' of the dead is inexpressible.[38] There is a certain consonance in Howe's work between the silences in the archive (particularly women's absent voices) and the constitution of the artwork itself, which at its core holds something that is also inexpressible and strange. In his discussion of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin defines the caesura (borrowed from Hölderlin) as 'the expressionless power in all media' as the interruption of the onrush of

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[35] Howe, *That This* (New York: New Directions, 2010), p. 35.

[36] Howe, *Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker* (New York: New Directions, 1996; repr. 2013).

[37] Charles Bernstein, 'TLS on Susan Howe and Rae Armantrout', *Jacket2*, <http://jacket2.org/commentary/tls-susan-howe-and-rae-armantrout> [accessed 8 June 2016]; Rebecca Ariel Porte, 'All That Is the Case: On Susan Howe's Chris Marker', *Los Angeles Review of Books,* 29 March 2013 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/all-that-is-the-case-on-susan-howes-chris-marker/> [accessed 7 July 2016]; William Montgomery, *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 186, p. 145.

[38] Howe, *That This* (New York: New Directions 2010), p. 34.

significance and symbolisation in artwork; the caesura is the interruption the brings forth the secret meaning of the work that cannot, after all, be represented.[39]

Indeed, it is the strangeness of coincidence and 'poetry telepathy' that, even when inscribed into a poem, cannot be conveyed.[40] The caesura calls attention to the work as a work, to representation as such; it reinforces Howe's words in *That This*, an elegy to her husband: 'Art is a mystery; artifice its form'.[41] Form, or artifice, is all that is available to us in order to perceive or recognise an object. 'Mystery' as such is unknowable, unspeakable, and abstract. The artifice that covers and veils the mystery is the allegorical image, in which an 'absent and unrecoverable meaning is joined to an excessive and overdetermined language […] incomplete and imperfect, because it evokes some meaning […] some "otherness" that it can designate but not join'.[42] The allegory, as 'the trope of death', unites the converging insights of Howe's poetry into loss, the material object, the inexpressible, the Dickinsonian/Hölderlinian caesura, and the alterity of history.[43]

As Montgomery notes, and as the many articles and monographs dedicated to Howe's work continue to show, 'there are numerous contexts in which Howe's work can be read'.[44] Her early career as a visual artist, her association with Lyn Heijinian and other L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, her matrilineal links to Irish modernism, her assimilation of American poets from Dickinson to Stevens, and, not least, her recurrent interest in the religious topography of colonial New England – all mark possible lines of enquiry into Howe's work.[45] Isolating these influences is probably impossible, a fact that, on its own, reveals a great deal about Howe's work: the associational logic with which it barely – tangentially – touches its subject 'matter' before it moves on or through to yet another, equally embedded, relation. This is not to say that Howe's attention to her material is superficial, but that her attention to *surfaces* (pages, curtains, images) enables the paratactic

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[39] Benjamin, 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*', p. 341.
[40] Howe uses a similar phrase as the title of a more recent publication. See Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (New York: New Directions, 2014).
[41] *That This,* p. 33
[42] Richard Howard Stamelman, *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 53.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Montgomery, p. 159.
[45] Regarding Howe's career as a visual artist, see Kaplan Harris, 'Susan Howe's Art and Poetry, 1968-1974', *Contemporary Literature*, 47.3 (Autumn 2006), pp. 440-471. For a discussion of Howe's (loose) association with Language poets, see Eleana Kim, 'Language Poetry: Dissident Practices and the Making of a Movement', *Readme*, 4 (Spring/Summer 2001), <http://home.jps.net/~nada/issuefour.htm> [accessed 19 March 2018].

arrangement of their similarities. In 'Bed Hangings II', Howe describes how her mother 'hung Jack's [Jack Yeats, W.B. Yeats's brother] illustrations and prints on the walls of any house or apartment we moved to as if they were windows. Broadsides were an escape route.'[46] This quotation may describe the structure of Howe's work: the point at which the print on the wall resembles a window, when one thing is perceived in another thing, an 'escape route' is opened. Howe's material dissolves into its similarities. In the next section, I want to explore this interplay between strangeness and similarity as a way of understanding a term that Howe uses in *The Nonconformist's Memorial*: poetry telepathy.

2.2 Howe's Archive of Nonsensuous Similarities

The form and structure of relation is one point at which I read Howe in dialogue with Walter Benjamin. Although Howe's work explores the many manifestations of relation – family relations and family resemblances; it is not characterised by unity but by a tendency of similarities to disjoin, to fall apart the moment they are perceived as such. This suggests that fragmentation both precedes and proceeds from moments of similarity, an insight that can also be found in Benjamin's thought: 'The perception of similarity is in every case bound to a flashing up. It flits past, can possibly be won again, but cannot really be held fast as can other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars.'[47]

By 'similar', Benjamin does not mean 'identical', and it is because of this distinction that mimesis becomes the bearer of all that is 'nonidentical' between a concept and the image that is meant to represent it, the thought and the word that expresses it, language and the script that translates it: 'everything mimetic in language is an intention which can appear at all only in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language'.[48] But, as Benjamin's example of children 'becoming' trains or windmills is meant to demonstrate, mimesis is not only the perception and generation of similarities but the capacity to 'become' similar. In other words, no similarity can be discerned in language without the simultaneous recognition of the mimetic object's difference from its predicate – indeed, 'something alien' is the sole signatory of the 'doctrine of the similar', a concept that foregrounds some of Benjamin's key formulations on language

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[46] Howe, 'Bed Hangings II', *The Midnight* (New York: New Directions, 2003), p. 75. Hereafter abbreviated to *TM*.
[47] Benjamin, 'Doctrine', p. (p. 697)
[48] Ibid.

and mimesis, and anticipates the dialectical image while also elaborating the alterity that structures similarity. The very basis of similarity, then, is found in the dissimilar, as Benjamin attests:

> 'Every word – indeed, the whole language – is onomatopoeic.' The key which finally makes this thesis fully transparent lies concealed in the concept of a nonsensuous similarity. For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their centre, we have to enquire how they all – while not having the slightest similarity to one another – are similar to the signified at their center.[49]

'Nonsensuous similarity' is the relation between things that are 'often […] not the slightest' bit similar.[50] Whether any object is actually 'similar' to another – and the arbitrary relationship between signs and signifiers suggests that perfect similitude is unobtainable – is not one of Benjamin's concerns. Instead, what he is driving toward is similarity as a mode of perception. But as 'nonsensuous' indicates, this mode of perception (what Benjamin will call in a later essay the 'mimetic faculty') since it evades the sensuous and escapes rationale, actually eludes the traditional model of perception; it is a situation where, as Brian Massumi writes, 'nothing actually given to our senses corresponds […] to the similarity that is nonetheless perceived.[51] This is why it 'cannot be held fast as can other perceptions'.[52]

Of course, Benjamin is less interested in 'demonstrating found similarities' than the 'processes which generate such similarities.'[53] The first example Benjamin provides is 'nature […] one need only think of mimicry'. It is clear from the start, then, that the perception of similarity falls under the rubric of mimesis. Benjamin's concept of mimesis diverges from its classical conception as mere imitation; indeed, Benjamin finds the origin of nonsensuous similarity in the more ancient, pre-philosophical practice of astrology and clairvoyance, in which the moment of interpretation – of reading the similar – is tied to the 'moment of birth, which is […] but an instant'. Astrologers used the position of the stars to describe the character and fate of the newborn; yet because this hypothetical newborn is in effect a 'tabula rasa' without any material experiences, he or she is inimitable, which is why

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[49] Ibid., p. 676.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2011), p. 105.
[52] 'Doctrine', p. 697.
[53] Ibid., p. 694. Benjamin is quick to point out that 'the sphere of life that formerly seemed to be governed by the law of similarity' has diminished with the emergence of modernity (as he does with the concept of the aura in 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' [1936]), p. 695.

Benjamin characterises this scenario as the *ne plus ultra* of nonsensuous similarity. The baby cannot yet be compared to anything – except something 'other' than itself.

At this point in Benjamin's essay on similarity, as in his other work, the distinction between image and word becomes confused, a 'confusion' in the Babelian sense which marks language itself, a subject he explores at length in the 1916 essay 'On the Language of Man and Language as Such'.[54] I do not wish to linger too long on this essay, but will attempt to briefly summarise Benjamin's argument, which is mobilised through a close reading of Genesis. God's Word, which is creative, does not 'refer' to a concept as does the human word; for example, 'Let there be light' coincides immediately with the creation of light. God's 'word' is identical to the thing it calls forth; the distinction between signifier and signified, referent and reference, does not exist in this 'pure' language which is simultaneous, total, and unified. In paradise, communication is unmediated. It is only after the expulsion from Eden that the mediacy of language, that is, language as a medium or means, came into being. As S. Brent Plate succinctly remarks, the 'arbitrary split between signifier and signified' occurred.[55] The consequence of this split is the impoverishment of language, now partial and finite, where 'the word must communicate something (other than itself). In this fact lies the true Fall of the spirit of language'.[56]

The word's obligation to communicate something 'other' than itself recalls the structure of the *Vexierbild,* an image in which the picture of a duck 'means' the picture of a rabbit; in both cases, 'other' has a double meaning. In the first case, 'other' merely connotes the disparity between the word and its referent; and, relatedly, in the second case, 'other' comes to mean 'something alien' and this 'something' is language itself. Benjamin conceives of (fallen) language as a kind of picture-puzzle, in which the 'imparting of the impartable [*Mitteilung des Mitteilbaren*], is at the same time Symbol of the non-impartable [*Symbols des Nicht-Mitteilbaren*].[57] The 'non-impartable' (or 'non-communicable') component of language is not the impossibility of communicating or 'imparting'; neither is it simply the

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[54] Benjamin, 'On the Language of Man and on Language as Such', *SW* 1, pp. 62-74 (p. 71). Further references to this text will be shortened to 'On Language'.

[55] S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts* (New York; London: Routledge, 2005), p. 65.

[56] 'On Language', p. 71.

[57] Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 43. Most translations render *Mitteilbaren* as 'communicable' and *Nicht-Mitteilbaren* as 'non-communicable', but Weber's translation provides a sense of the original term, wherein language 'parts' with itself in order to designate meaning.

'opposite' of communication; rather, it is the 'ability to stay *with* that from which it parts'.[58] What this tells us is that the linguistic schism initiated by the Fall does not cause 'pure language' to disappear from sight; rather, it is retained in the 'un-impartable' element of all languages as the 'residue of the creative word of God'.[59] In other words, following Samuel Weber, the non-impartable is that which cannot be mediated and which is therefore *immediate,* 'that which is defined by the potentiality of taking leave of itself, of its place and position, of altering itself'.[60]

Similarity, I am trying to suggest, is constituted not by 'sameness': rather, things become similar precisely because they are non-identical. The incongruity between a word and its object is the defining characteristic of human language, according to Benjamin. This incongruity subsequently provides the grounds for similarity that he outlines in 'Doctrine of the Similar'. The 'alien', 'other' quality of similarity (its uncanniness, in other words) – the 'difference' in the 'familiar' – is none other than the strangeness of language itself. Language is strange to itself because it can only refer to its object by way of similarity:

> It is thus nonsensuous similarity that establishes the ties not only between what is said and what is meant, but also between what is written and what is meant, and equally between the spoken and the written. And every time, it does so in a completely new, original, and underivable way. The most important of these ties may, however, be the one mentioned last – between what is written and what is said. For the similarity which reigns here is comparatively the most nonsensuous. It is also the one which takes the longest to be reached.[61]

This is why Benjamin writes that language, and no more so than in 'script', has become 'an archive of nonsensuous similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences.'[62] In the latter statement, taken together with Benjamin's earlier account of language, nonsensuous similarity is the basis of reading. Although Benjamin does not explicitly discuss the tendency of similarities to proliferate at the point of their dispersion (the moment after they 'flit by') that I have described in Howe's work, it can nonetheless be discerned in the phrase 'archive of nonsensuous similarities': language is an archive from which any number of

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[58] Weber, p. 197. Original emphasis.
[59] 'On Language', p. 74.
[60] Weber, p. 42.
[61] 'Doctrine', p. 695.
[62] Ibid.

configurations can be fashioned because of the non-identity of what is said (in language) and what is meant; its arbitrary signification recalls Benjamin's pronouncement on baroque allegory, where 'any thing, person, or relationship can mean absolutely anything else'.[63] Like Benjamin, Howe is acutely alert to the insufficiencies of language, particularly written language, and the lyric poem, which hovers ambiguously between its sonic origins and its modern 'enclosure' within the pages of the book. The potential disjuncture between 'what is written and what is said' is as deeply determined in Howe's work as it is in Benjamin's. Howe's work explores language and script as 'an archive of nonsensuous similarities' situated in the archive as such. In what follows, I analyse 'Melville's Marginalia', a poem sequence from *The Nonconformist's Memorial* which establishes Howe's dialectical disruption of the archive (which holds the documents of barbarism and the records of the 'winners'), and where, through 'shock of poetry telepathy', she 'brushes history against the grain' (to quote Benjamin once more) by uncovering a history that appears to undermine linear chronology.[64]

Howe's archive is an 'archive of nonsensuous similarity', a product of what Benjamin calls 'magical reading'.[65] The 'shock' Howe experiences is the flash of a dialectical encounter between past and present which appears as 'the caesura in the movement of thought'.[66] While in 'Melville's Marginalia' this caesura occurs phenomenologically (within the 'movement of thought'), in *The Midnight*, Howe uses the image of the tissue interleaf – a piece of tissue paper that was used in bookbinding until to 1914 – to signify the dialectical arrest of history. In contrast to Chapter 1, where I located Markson's late work in relation to Benjamin's *Arcades Project,* in this chapter I situate Howe's poetry in relation to Benjamin's early work on the German *Trauerspiel* and his mystical theory of language.

'Melville's Marginalia' can be seen to develop Benjamin's notion of nonsensuous similarity and the theologically inflected theory of language that underpins it. It begins with an extract from Herman Melville's *Journal* where the author of *Moby-Dick* parenthetically describes his tour of Roman ruins and his pilgrimage to Keats's and Shelley's graves: 'Went to Baths of Caracalla – Wonderful. Massive. Ruins form, as it were, natural bridges of

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[63] *OGTD*, p. 175.
[64] 'Melville's Marginalia', *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (New York: New Directions, 1993), p. 115. Subsequent references to 'Melville's Marginalia' will be abbreviated to 'MM', and *The Nonconformist's Memorial* will be shortened to *NM*.
[65] 'Doctrine', p. 697.
[66] *AP*, [N10a,3], p. 475.

thousands of arches. There are glades, & thickets among the ruins – high up. – Thought of Shelley. […] Read Keats' epitaph. Separated from the adjacent ground by trench. – Shelley in the other ground.'[67] Howe thus frames her archive encounter with Melville, one of her idols, with a letter describing his own pilgrimage. This framing also suggests that the archive transforms from an oppressive epistemological regime to a grave-site where authors and the afterlife of their works might be interred. This transformation, of course, is actualised by the poet and her incursion into the archive as a renegade outsider.

Following this quotation, Howe recalls 'the spring of 1991' when 'I was teaching *Billy Budd* for a graduate seminar in Philadelphia'.[68] While 'searching through Melville criticism', Howe 'notice[s] two maroon dictionary-size volumes, lying haphazardly, out of reach, almost out of sight on the topmost shelf. That's how I found *Melville's Marginalia* or how *Melville's Marginalia* found me.'[69] The aleatory nature of Howe's discovery is paramount here, and even more so is the inaccessible, 'almost out of reach' location of the volume that will become the driving force behind the poem: does it 'find' her or does she 'find' it? I have been using the word 'discovery' to describe Howe's encounter with the marooned volume, but perhaps 'stumbles' is more accurate; Howe empties 'discovery' of its intentionality – the volume 'finds *her*' – fully aware of the historical implications of 'discovery' as domination. Even so, Howe 'meets' the book halfway between intention and accident, stressing the forms of marginal, medial contact that proliferate in this poem.[70]

Wilson Walker Cowen was the compiler of *Melville's Marginalia*, a book that 'collected and transcribed every page from every known volume of Herman Melville's library' whom Howe describes in Bartleby-like terms as a 'sub-sub-graduate student in a time before librarians.'[71] Because it only reproduces the pages Melville annotated from each book, Cowen's text has 'little forward trajectory'; as a 'literal transcription' using 'each original's type-set line lengths, [his] prose often looks like poetry.'[72] Cowen's literal transcription functions here as Hölderlin's 'literal translations' of Sophocles do for Benjamin.[73] A literal translation disregards the coherence of the sentence in favour of each

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[67] 'MM', p. 97.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] In addition, it evokes the lyric 'middle voice' which oscillates between subject and object.
[71] 'MM', p. 99.
[72] Ibid., p. 98.
[73] Although I refer to Cowen, the literal transcriber, in relation to Benjamin's translator, it is actually Mangan who most resembles Hölderlin-as-translator in 'Melville's Marginalia'. Mangan's translations are in many

discrete word. The sentence, in Benjamin's analogy, 'is the wall before the language of the original' while the word is 'the arcade'.[74] These transparent, monadic arcades recall Howe's mother's 'escape route' that appears when Jack Yeats's illustrations suddenly resemble windows. For Howe, that which covers also reveals and opens. Thus oriented toward the word, the literal translation/transcription opens a way out of the circumscribed meaning of the original. Like the relationship between the word and what is meant, translation lays bare the discrepancy between an original and its translation; a 'perfect' translation is no more attainable than 'pure language'. As Bettine Menke writes, literal translation 'dis-places the word (to be translated) [which] becomes doubled and disintegrates within that turning (away) through which it directs itself towards an other (the translated) word'.[75] Menke's description of literal translation unearths the structure of relation that I have been attempting to delineate: similarity *requires* fragmentation in order to 'survive'. Cowen's literal transcription does not distinguish between Melville's marginal notes and the text they are written on; the transcription thus becomes something 'other' than either of them; as Howe remarks, his 'prose often looks like poetry', calling it what Howe describes as a 'synthesis of attraction and withdrawal'.[76] Both Benjamin's Hölderlin and Howe's Cowen underscore the media of translation and manuscript. Indeed, one might approach Howe's assimilation of others' work into her own as a 'word-for-word' translation into poetic language. These structures of translation and similarity are at play when Montgomery writes that 'Melville's Marginalia' 'uproots Mangan from his minor place in literary studies and inserts him into an alien [American] tradition'.[77] In doing so, Mangan 'becomes doubled' in the fictional figure

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ways even more baffling than Hölderlin's since they are often more than once-removed from the original. This leads the critic David Lloyd to ask, 'is Mangan, properly speaking, the sole author of the famous poem "And Then No More", since he announces it as a translation from Friedrich Rückert [a German poet] who in turn claims to be translating from the 'Persian''?' Moreover, many of Mangan's 'translations' are fictional, assuming a pseudonymous language to match the many *noms des plume* used by the poet, which Lloyd insists 'enable the poet to don masks – masks that both constitute Mangan, but in another way obscure him.' See David Lloyd, 'Crossing Over: On Mangan's "Spirits Everywhere"', *Essays on James Clarence Mangan: The Man in the Cloak*, ed. by Sinéad Sturgeon (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), n.p. E-book. Lloyd makes mention of Benjamin in this essay and provides many insights into Mangan's 'translations' and translation as such.

[74] Benjamin, 'Task', p. 260.

[75] '"However one calls into the forest…": Echoes of Translation' *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism,* ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen (New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 83-97 (p. 91.)

[76] 'MM', p. 98. Cowen even preserves the 'erasures' made, in all probability, according to Howe, by Melville's wife or daughters in an attempt to eradicate 'Melville's feelings and reactions to women': the nearly obliterated markings shows the author was much too disturbed by this subject to write about it.' Ibid. The literal transcription (like translation) is attendant to the absences and gaps it engenders in the process.

[77] Montgomery, p. 121.

of Bartleby, and vice versa.[78] He also doubles Howe's own mother's double or rather triple identity as an Anglo-Irish woman who became an American, and her 'insertion' into an 'alien' country.

James Clarence Mangan was a nineteenth-century Irish poet, scrivener, ordnance surveyor, translator, and political writer admired by Yeats and Joyce, but who in his (and Melville's) own time was fairly obscure. In this volume Howe finds 'a newspaper clipping about the poet […] pasted to the inside cover under the first owner's name' which Melville had 'lined out'.[79] Also in the margins is a calculation: Melville 'has worked out the poet's dates' of birth and death, the sum of which is only forty-five. Mangan died in 1848.[80] 'Bartleby', as Howe notes above, was published in 1853. Moreover, Melville's copy of Mangan's work was published in 1859. Origins and originality are concepts that Howe interrogates across her work, across the whole of *The Nonconformist's Memorial* but particularly in 'Melville's Marginalia'.[81] The book belonging to Melville that Howe is most intrigued by is *Poems by James Clarence Mangan*:

On a January morning, in the hushed privacy of the Anglo-European-American Houghton Library, I opened *Poems by James Clarence Mangan, with Biographical Introduction by John Mitchel* (New York: Haverty, 1859). I saw the pencilled trace of Herman Melville's passage through John Mitchel's introduction and knew by shock of poetry telepathy the real James Clarence Mangan is the progenitor of fictional Bartleby.

The problem was chronology.

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[78] Ibid.
[79] 'MM', p. 115.
[80] Ibid.
[81] The volume's title poem concerns the moment in the Gospel of John where Mary Magdalene encounters Christ after the resurrection, the *noli me tangere* moment. Howe is attentive to the editorial history of the Gospels and the suppression of Mary's role as Christ's disciple: 'The act of Uniformity/ ejected her', 'MM', p. 5. Because the Gospels are (always already) belated 'transcriptions' of Christ's sayings, they are no more 'original' – and thus obtain no authority – than any other translation: 'all men form a silent man/ who wrote the author down', p. 44. Although I do not wish to digress too much from 'Melville's Marginalia', I do want to mark how *The Nonconformist's Memorial* broadly frames the theological undercurrent of the former text and asserts language's 'grasping' gesture: 'The nets were torn/ the Gospel did not grasp', p. 7. When language grasps, it tears apart; into fragments, stutters, hesitations, silences, broken-off sentences.

Melville wrote 'Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street' during the summer of 1853.[82]

It is here that the dialogue between Howe and Benjamin finally becomes clear. The archive thus becomes a medium consisting in 'a movement that separates *from* itself, and yet – here the paradox of what Benjamin himself […] calls the 'magic' of language – in so doing establishes a relation with itself as *other*.'[83] In 'Melville's Marginalia' language takes on a more mystical role than Benjamin probably would have liked (although the role of mysticism in his work should not be underestimated). Howe writes of Melville's marginal notes, 'Marks he made in the margins of his books are often a conversation with the dead'.[84] Benjamin defines divinatory practices of antiquity, such as astrology or haruspicy, the reading of entrails, as the origins of 'reading per se'.[85] Through 'magic reading' – which obtains from the 'clairvoyance [that] has over the course of history yielded its old powers' to 'script and language' – Howe establishes the 'real' Mangan as the 'progenitor' (i.e., the 'original') to 'fictional' Bartleby.[86]

The problem is chronology.

According to the dates Howe provides, the chances of Melville coming into contact with Mangan's work before writing 'Bartleby' are slim indeed. This is not as much of a 'problem' as Howe might initially lead the reader to believe. The kind of biblio-chronological evidence required to empirically install Mangan as Melville's model for Bartleby would neither generate nor necessitate the 'shock of poetry telepathy' that Howe describes. However, Howe does later manage to establish that Melville, through a subscription to a literary magazine *United States Magazine and Literary Review,* which in 1851 published an issue 'entirely devoted to Mangan': 'Mangan already had American readers during the 1850s, though it would be hard to know', she writes. Howe finds a reference to an article by Francis J. Thompson called 'Mangan in America: 1850-1860' wherein the author 'demonstrates persuasively that Mangan's reputation was legendary among writers in New York City'.[87] Although Howe determines that 'Melville […] was already familiar with the poet's life and work' prior to 1859, the nonsensuous similarity

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[82] 'MM', p. 115.
[83] Weber, p. 91. Original emphasis.
[84] 'MM', p. 97.
[85] 'Doctrine', pp. 697.
[86] 'Doctrine', pp. 697-698; 'MM', p. 115.
[87] 'MM', p. 116.

between the real Mangan and the fictional Bartleby still obtains.[88] I am interested in the initial 'shock of poetry telepathy' that leads Howe to intuit a relation that evades chronology and interrupts the linear temporality of (literary) historicism.[89] Shock belongs to a specific structure of temporality: time's singular arrest.[90] The 'shock' in 'Melville's Marginalia' is, on the one hand, the 'shock' of recognition that enters Mangan and Bartleby into nonsensuous similitude; one the other hand, it is the 'shock' of the chronology that forces them to withdraw their momentary affinity – an affinity whose imperfect, incomplete residue endures in the text as a historical and linguistic afterlife.

The line break before and after the '[t]he problem was chronology' is significant. Typographically set off from the previous paragraph, it demarcates Howe's telepathic 'shock' that leads her to relate Mangan and Bartleby and the subsequent research which seems to contradict her visionary discovery. As a linguistic unit, 'the problem was chronology' mediates the paragraphs that border it; the content of this sentence rends them asunder. The placement of 'chronology' (as a word and as a concept) at once establishes the relation that emerges outside of time – and also 'breaks' that relation, preventing it from yielding to perfect or complete accordance. Nothing could better describe the attenuated sentence presented by 'the problem was chronology' than the prosodic figure of the caesura I mentioned earlier, an intervening 'cut' in the poem that forces a metrical hesitation. For Benjamin, it marks the 'moments of arrest', the 'standstill' that is required 'in order to give free reign to an expressionless power inside all artistic media'.[91] In other words, the momentary silence enforced or enjambed by the caesura *stands in for* the meaning that words cannot – but nonetheless aspire to – bear. Analogous to the linguistic Fall, which splits pure language into immanent fragments, the caesura occurs when 'something beyond the poet interrupts the language of the poetry'.[92]

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[88] It is notable that this relationship interposes history and fiction, drawing attention to the constitution of history as a constructed narrative, like fiction.

[89] Ibid.

[90] It is, of course, also related to traumatic shock and the shock of belated remembrance, what Freud designates as *Nachträglichkeit*, sometimes translated as deferred action, but it is now more commonly rendered as 'afterwardness'. Freud's afterwardsness is distinct from Benjamin's concept of afterlife, although they both incorporate forms of belatedness. I discuss this term in Chapter 3. Jean Laplanche further develops Freud's concept of afterwardsness in *Essays on Otherness*, trans. by Luke Thurston, ed. by John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999).

[91] 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*', *SW* 1, pp. 297-360 (p. 341).

[92] Ibid.

The relation Howe perceives in Mangan and Bartleby lies at the margins of experience; they are, as Howe writes, 'names who are strangers out of bounds of the bound margin'.[93] When one thing turns toward the other in relation, both break apart, a movement replicated in the embodiment of Howe's research: 'Pages of "Fragments From an Unfinished Autobiography" are so brittle pieces break off when I *turn*'.[94] This (in turn) returns us to Benjamin's rhetoric of translation which involves the simultaneous breaking away (from the original) and breaking into (the translation) that characterises the afterlife. Howe's poetry yields the structure of the afterlife which is based not on continuity or sameness but interruption and alteration. Mangan becomes something 'other', placed outside of his original context and oriented towards Bartleby and vice versa – neither can be fully separated into the other; each retains something that cannot be imparted and speaks to the incomplete, partial nature of relation that Benjamin variously ascribes to translation and mimesis.

What is at work is a kind of negative theology of relation where what is missing from relation, the 'un-impartable' content of an object that cannot be assimilated, reveals its (absent) presence in what has been imparted. The caesura thus prevents the poet/reader from interpreting the relation between Mangan and Bartleby as mere resemblance, an affinity based on appearances but alerts the reader to their alterity. As Howe's '*shock* of poetry telepathy' attests, their true, 'secret' relation is inarticulable because it occurs outside of ordinary perception *and* within an arrested, traumatic temporality. But this is also, as we have seen, the temporality in which Benjamin's concept of nonsensuous similarity emerges ('flitting by', unable to be 'held fast') and 'grasps' Howe's own maxim that 'perception of an object means loosing it and losing it.'[95] This is reflected in the arrangement of the text, which is intercut with caesural fragments of text, excerpts, and typographical interventions which present sentences as mirror images. Montgomery describes what, alongside Barbour, I am calling the caesura in Howe's work, as 'a moment of arrest that prevents language flowing through the normal syntactical routes, from one thing to another'.[96] While I agree that, in general in Howe's work, the 'moment of arrest' stalls language and distorts its 'flow', it does not prevent her from carrying 'one thing' over 'to another'. It is this stuttered movement that characterises the associational dis-order of her texts. In fact, as I have been

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[93] 'MM', p. 100.
[94] Ibid., p. 117. My emphasis.
[95] Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, p. 23.
[96] Montgomery, p. 127.

arguing, the caesura that fragments relation is a cut through which new attachments can be – momentarily – formed. As Barbour writes in her discussion of the dash, the 'caesura-image' both 'interrupts and conjoins'.[97]

Benjamin regards the similarity between the written word and the spoken word as 'comparatively the most nonsensuous' because the written word is the most 'distant' from the embodied voice: sound is translated into script and enclosed on the page. While writing is an embodied act, the printed word is detached not only from the author's hand, separated from her written signature, but also from her voice, even as the word acts as an index to that voice. This applies particularly to lyric poetry's spoken, even sung, origins. If this suggests that textuality takes precedence over aurality and orality, Howe is often at pains to insist otherwise: 'in spite of all my talk about the way a page looks […] strangely, the strongest element I feel when I am writing something is acoustic'.[98] Howe conceives of script in terms almost identical to Benjamin: 'I never really lost the sense that words, even single letters, are images […] The look of a word is part of its meaning – the meaning that escapes the dictionary definition.'[99] While she emphasises the visual, 'hieroglyphic' quality of the letters, Howe also recognises the sonic connotations attached to 'script', which designates a system of writing *and* playscripts from which actors read their lines aloud. The act of reading script aloud is itself the mimetic embodiment of another body's voice. What Howe seems to be suggesting is that the written word preserves some vestiges of the voice it once belonged to. There is an obvious delay, however, between the moment a thing is written and the moment it is 'sounded out' – suggesting, again, the element of belatedness that is often at work in Howe's and Benjamin's own overlapping understanding of similarity. Howe further probes the dialectic nature of the spoken and the written word in 'Melville's Marginalia' during her characteristic meta-poeitic commentary: 'I thought one way to write about a loved author would be to follow what trails he follows through the words of others'.[100] These 'trails' are by no means clear and unambiguous, precisely because the voices Howe looks

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[97]Barbour, p. 139. Barbour also remarks on the resemblance of the 'open-ended, undefined spaces, in margins, in edges, and borders' found in *The Midnight* to Benjamin's enigmatic *Konvolut N* in *The Arcades Project*. Ibid.

[98] Howe interviewed by Lynn Keller, *Contemporary Literature,* 34.1 (Spring 1995), pp. 1-34 (p. 13). Subsequent references will be shortened to 'Keller interview'.

[99] Ibid., pp. 6-7.

[100] 'MM', p. 100.

for in the margins are elusive and incomplete, for as soon as Howe 'grasps' one voice, it disappears through another 'escape route' of association and she must 'grasp' once again.

Howe views poetry as that 'which brings similitude and representation to configurations waiting from forever to be spoken'.[101] The distance between written words and the voice is often longer than a lifetime; they appear to 'wait forever to be spoken': the relationship between the poetic voice and these 'waiting' voices is a relationship between the living and the dead.[102] Through recollections written by Mangan's contemporaries and his own autobiographical writings, Howe draws a portrait of a man 'roosting on a ladder/ for several months/ even several years/ […] in a brown garment […] which lasted until/ the day of his death'.[103] Howe quotes John Savage, one of Mangan's contemporaries, who writes that the poet 'glides rather than walks' and describes his 'silver white locks surround[ing]' his face 'like a tender halo'.[104] Mangan, Howe records, died of starvation in Dublin after contracting cholera. Joyce, whom Howe also quotes, echoes this sentiment: 'is it not perhaps a profound sense of sorrow and bitterness that explains in Mangan all the names and titles that he gives himself, and the fury of translation in which he tried to hide himself?'[105] David Lloyd pronounces this as the 'death of the author' *avant la lettre*. Howe takes this notion to its extreme, underscoring the dual meaning of *corpus* within her bibliographic poetics:

Wearied human language

take me so that I am no longer dispersed

and appear not to know

When I wander off

roughened and wrought human

to the matter of fact[106]

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[101] Howe, 'THERE ARE NOT LEAVES […]', *Europe of Trusts*, p. 14.
[102] In 'Scare Quotes I', Howe sketches out a short biography of Frederick Law Olmsted, quoting from his own autobiographical reminiscences. Howe imagines Olmsted as a child taking 'solitary walks as a remedy for sadness', before abruptly shifting to the present: 'So much for the person. He started out a few pages ago. Now no one living remembers the fall of that voice from sound into silence.' *TM,* p. 48.
[103] 'MM', p. 135.
[104] Ibid., p. 108.
[105] 'MM', p. 117.
[106] 'MM', p. 123.

Human language is 'wearied' because it must always refer to what it means in a grasping gesture. It is unclear whether the lyric 'I' pertains to Howe, who 'appears not to know/ when [she] wanders off' or to Mangan, whose potential immortality as Bartleby (but whose 'fate' he shares) is 'roughened and wrought human/ to the matter of fact'. A persistent figure in Howe's work is the 'library cormorant' (Emerson and the minister John Edwards), a creature of the archive.[107] But Mangan is the most 'creaturely' of these, a being whose mortality is so concentrated that even his friends describe him as a 'spectral looking man', leading Howe to imagine him as a 'spectral creature on a ladder/all his soul was in the book/ in his arms'.[108] In the 'translation' between life and death, what is left are words, like any other translation. Above all, this emphasises, in extremis, the materiality and contingency of the word, not only in the linguistic sense discussed above, but as the 'bodily trace' left by the writer or – in the margins – the reader. Benjamin defines 'trace' as 'the appearance of proximity, however distant what it left behind may be,' while the 'aura is the appearance of distance, however close what it conjures up may be.' Howe's poetry complicates this notion. In the following sections, I want to investigate this materiality, and the significance of both aura and trace in *The Midnight*.

2.3 Microfilm and Interleaf: The Afterlife of the Aura

Before aura is mentioned by name in Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay, it is defined negatively as 'the *one* thing [that] is lacking [from] the work of art'.[109] When the term is finally introduced it is as 'what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art'.[110] The aura's negative constitution in the essay will become important for reasons I will introduce presently. Benjamin's most characteristic description of the aura, as 'the apparition of a distance, however near it may be', is posed against 'the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things spatially and humanly, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction'.[111] Benjamin associates the constitutive 'distance' of the aura with the 'cult value' of religious

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[107] *The Birth-mark*, p. 3.
[108] 'MM', p. 107.
[109] Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', *SW* 4, pp. 251-183 (p. 253). Hereafter shortened to 'Work of Art'.
[110] Ibid., p. 254.
[111] Ibid., p. 255.

art, providing examples of prehistoric cave drawings, ancient Greek temple statues, and images of the Madonna.[112]

Benjamin's central thesis in the 'Work of Art' essay, is that, with the introduction of intensive methods of technical reproduction, the original work of art (conceptually and in actuality) loses its unique situation in time and place. The aura is secured by the art object's material history – the 'changes to the physical structure of the work over time' – and its singular location in place, its 'provenance', so to speak. Auratic objects can be placed in a chain of ownership based on the structure of tradition in which things and knowledge are 'handed down from the past'.[113] The concept of aura that Benjamin explores in this text is rooted in the 'observance' of religious art rooted in a specific time and place: 'the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual, the source of its original use value'; this 'cult value' persists 'however mediated it may be […] as secularized ritual in even the most profane forms'.[114] While artworks have, Benjamin asserts, always possessed a certain 'reproducibility' ('in principle, the work of art has always been reproducible'), the rapid escalation of *technical* modes of reproduction (as opposed to still-manual methods such as lithography or woodcut) '*detaches* the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition'.[115] Before the advent of photography, the aura's distance was not only maintained between an object and its beholder, but extended to the relationship between original and copy. Indeed, before the aura's decline, there were no 'copies' to speak of, only 'forger[ies]' whose incongruousness from the original could be readily discerned.[116] With the intensification of reproductive technologies came mass reproduction, and, so the story goes, the aura of the work of art faded away. The disappearance of the aura inaugurated a transformation in the way art was perceived and made: as Jan Mieszkowski writes, '[t]echnical reproduction [became] an artistic process in its own right', citing Benjamin's assertion that 'the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed *for* reproducibility'.[117] By making works of art accessible to the masses, the distance between a work and its beholder which constitutes the aura is significantly diminished. The aura of an artwork also depends on its materiality, its 'physical duration' in the course of its existence in time. If the work of art is

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[112] Ibid., pp. 254-255.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid., p. 256.
[115] Ibid., p. 252, p. 254. My emphasis.
[116] Ibid., p. 254.
[117] Jan Mieszkowski, 'Art Forms', *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Benjamin, 'Work of Art', p. 256.

being constantly reproduced, the original not only loses its 'authority' and 'authenticity', it becomes less valuable in the sense that it can be substituted with a copy, which is not subject to decay.[118] In what follows, I want to suggest that Howe's poetry offers a re-evaluation of the aura through two poems in *The Midnight* that revolve around reprography and print technology: the first is the prose poem, 'Scare Quotes II', in which Howe meditates on her 'contact' with the microfilm copies of Charles Sanders Peirce's manuscripts; is bifurcated poem in two parts, spread across the recto and verso sides of a page just after the book's title page.[119] Both, I argue, suggest that the aura does not disappear with the advent of technological reproduction, but that it can reappear when certain modes of reproduction fade away. Furthermore, I suggest that Howe's own use of technology is a means of interrogating the divide between original and copy.

Throughout her work, Susan Howe foregrounds the materiality of both text and textile by utilising forms of reprography: x-rays, electrostatic reproduction, photocopying, and photography. This slightly paradoxical relationship – between the materiality of the book form and the intangibility of the copy and its distance from the original – is played out and redoubled in work particularly in works such as *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, *The Midnight*, and *That This*. Howe's exploration of the dynamic between original and copy encompasses aesthetic, theological, and historical categories (though these categories are by no means rigidly discrete). Howe asks why, and how, certain images, including images of texts survive, while others become extinct. The highly contingent and perilous process of archival conservation mediates our 'contact' with historical documents. In archives and libraries, 'copies' – such as microfiches and, more recently, digitisation – have become instrumental not only to the accessibility of these resources, but also to the preservation of fragile documents whose pages or plates may be damaged by physical consultation. This highly mediated relationship between scholars, such as Howe, and the documents they consult, generates an otherworldly, cthonic experience which Howe describes in *The Midnight*:

> Most of my contact with Peirce manuscripts has been via microfilm. It is a retrograde medium doomed by computers to extinction. Microform machines are hypnotic, pale-eyed, anonymous […] As I scroll a spool of film up and down, forward and back, across the mechanical apparatus, various embedded characters, cryptic lists of

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[118] One no longer has to visit the Louvre to look at the Mona Lisa, for example. Of course, the dizzying proliferation of copies today could be said to increase the value of the original and its 'cult value' so much that the very notions of 'original' and 'authenticity' themselves acquire sacred dimensions.
[119] 'Scare Quotes II', *TM*, p. 131.

numbers, erasures, questions, miniscule messages, shifting shapes, excesses and defects, strange survivals, and rhetorical effects can be reeled or rotated each into each. The film on the spool is frozen yet unapologetically even rhythmically various. I am a detective, an editor, a director, a watching eye. I work in a zone of colorless absence. *The original is untouchable, what I see before, incorporeal.*[120]

It is an obvious but notable point that, compared to immediacy, which connotes instantaneity, mediacy designates some form of duration and indicates a distance that can be traversed. Howe's encounter with microfilm in 'Scare Quotes II' lays bare the fact that the experience of history, if it can be called that, is always already mediated: one only comes to know it at various degrees of remove, an orientation which is governed by a temporality of belatedness. Any 'historical' insight must occur after the fact, or 'lately'. Indeed, the microfilm, the tool used by Howe to make 'contact' with Peirce's manuscripts, is on its way toward obsolescence, a 'retrograde medium doomed by computers to extinction'.[121] Even so, the microform machine allows the reader to magnify and focus certain aspects of the manuscript which are less visible, if not inaccessible, in the consultation of the original, physical papers. At the same time, the microform machine (commonly and intriguingly called a microform *reader*) has an inevitably 'mechanical' effect on Howe's perception of the text, whose contents can be 'reeled or rotated each into each'. In *The Midnight,* the microfilm/microform reader represents the recurring overlap between text and textile. Part sewing machine, part camera, the microform reader requires the film 'spool' to be carefully loaded into the machine's 'spindle'.

Microfilms are photographic reproductions of texts that have been miniaturised in a process called micrography; the 'original' that it reproduces cannot be seen without the magnifying apparatus provided by microfilm machine. Microfilm marks a certain democratisation of rare and often fragile manuscripts; it provides the possibility of dispensing with (often-costly) pilgrimage to the archive where originals are held. Even so, these copies can result in restricted access to the original, as Howe discovers in Harvard's Houghton Library. Looking to consult the Emily Dickinson Room, where the poet's manuscripts, letters, and personal library, Howe is instead met with an acerbic note from the library's curator:

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[120] 'Scare Quotes II', *TM*, p. 137.
[121] Ibid, p. 136.

To Whom It May Concern:

The books in the Emily Dickinson Room have been repeatedly studied and examined with the hope of finding annotations in the handwriting of Emily Dickinson. After years of study, no one has found a single mark that could be possibly assigned to her.

In the process of this fruitless examination the books have suffered, and many of them have been transferred to the repair shelf. In order to avoid more useless wear and the shattering of 19th century publisher's cloth cases, we have closed the Emily Dickinson Room Library for further examination.[122]

Howe's work repeatedly concerns itself the politics surrounding the accessibility of archives and other academic institutions. It would not be unfair to point out the conservative (and this word crosses many connotations) bent of the above-quoted note. The preservation of rare documents is, of course, vital to their future consultation, indeed, to their survival; but to deny access to such documents on the grounds of 'fruitless examination' and 'useless wear' implies are a hierarchical arrangement of scholarly consultation which values 'results' over inquiry as such, particularly the type of poetic scholarship practiced by Howe. Like the microfilm, the archive itself acts as mediator between the reader and the original text. Although the microfilm is a tangible object, its contents are virtual, which is to say 'untouchable', separated by glass. Howe cannot reach into the screen to handle the pages or hear them rustle as they turn; the materiality characteristic of the manuscript disappears. The microfilm thus marks an unusual incursion into the structure of Benjamin's aura. It is a copy, a reproduction, but it maintains both the physical and metaphysical characteristics of the aura: it has 'the apparition of a distance, however near it may be.'[123]

The first page of *The Midnight* is a facsimile image of the interleaf that shields the title page of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae*, which Howe inherited from her maternal uncle, John Manning.[124] Immediately after this image, on an unnumbered page, Howe offers a meditation on the interleaf, a piece of tissue paper that was once commonly used in bookbinding:

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[122] Ibid, p. 131.
[123] 'Work of Art', p. 254.
[124] See Chelsea Jennings, 'Susan Howe's Facsimile Aesthetic', *Contemporary Literature*, 56.4 (Winter 2015), pp. 660-694. Jennings devotes this article to Howe's use of facsimile images across her work.

There was a time when bookbinders placed a tissue interleaf between frontispiece and title page in order to prevent illustration and text from rubbing together. Although a sign is understood to be consubstantial with the thing or being it represents, word and picture are essentially rivals. The transitional space between image and scripture is often a zone of contention. Here we must separate. Even printers and binders drift apart. Tissue paper for wrapping or folding can also be used for tracing. Mist-like transience. Listen, quick rustling.[125]

The interleaf thus becomes a vestigial part of the book's materiality; it is 'rendered […] obsolete' (under the inauspicious sign of the First World War) by industrial technology. From the interleaf's design, which prevented illustration and title page from smudging each other, Howe adumbrates the 'rivalry' between 'word and picture', drawing on the theological and aesthetic forms of iconoclasm (and, in turn, forms of iconography). Its purpose is to preserve the 'boundaries' between text and illustration, to prevent ink from transferring. And yet because it occupies an *interstitial* space between the pages, it necessarily and significantly *blurs* those boundaries. Howe 'folds' the interleaf's purpose onto itself: it becomes a 'transitional space' and a 'zone of contention', strongly suggesting more intricate and entangling relations between text and image, and, through her use of the facsimile image, challenges the injunction to 'separate' notions of original and copy. For Howe, the interleaf, like the margin, is a material component of the book that, despite its original purpose, offers paradigms of reading that resist the sequential, linearised, 'progressive' physical ordering of pages.

Rather than reproduce the image of the interleaf as I have done below [Fig. 2], as a flat image in the middle of the page, Howe re-presents the interleaf in its three-dimensional entirety, taking up both sides of the page; on the verso the text can be seen fairly clearly through the covering of the interleaf (its wrinkles and creases are clearly visible), while the recto is a mirror-image of the same. The grainy, 'mist-like' quality of the page visually suggests two forms of 'transience': the opacity of the page suggests the sudden materialisation of the interleaf and its vanishing into obsolescence.
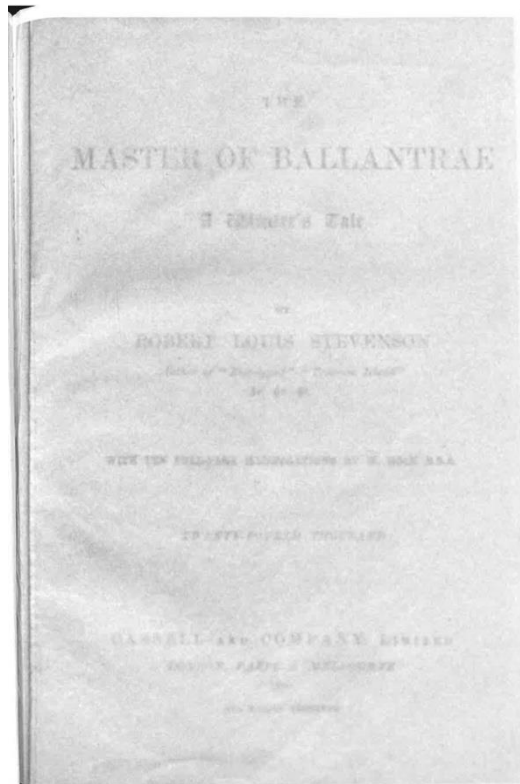
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[125] *TM*, n.p.

Figure 2. Interleaf from *The Midnight*

On the verso side of this page, Howe offers a companion text to her initial discussion of the interleaf:

> The counterfeit presentment of two papers. After 1914, advances in printing technology rendered an interleaf obsolete. Mischief delights in playing with surfaces. Today each spectral scrap intact in a handed down book has *acquired an enchanted aura* quite apart from its original utilitarian function. Wonderfully life-like, approaching transparency, not shining; this pale or wanly yellow, tangible intangible murderously gentle exile, mutely begs to be excused. Superstition remains – as spiritual hyphen. Listen, quick rustling.[126]

It may be clear by now that describing contours of this text involves the language of the manuscript: verso, recto, frontispiece, interleaf. The emphasis on the materiality of the book is paramount in these passages, which nevertheless pass into the immaterial. Investing a material object with 'life' may seem consonant with the commodity fetish. Such a reading

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[126] *TM*, n.p. My emphases. The recto page ends with the line, '"Give me a sheet' without closing the quote with a quotation mark. The verso page ends with another incomplete line, in which the placement of the single quotation mark is reversed: 'On your side, with pleasure.'" Here the interleaf is figured as a kind of prophylactic against the erotic merging of word and image which it is designed to prevent from 'rubbing together'.

is possible, but I would suggest that Howe's project can be conceived as a materialist one in the sense that it draws attention to the book (rather than the text) as an object, invoking its production and circulation. However, as David Ayers points out, 'it is […] problematic to conceive of the book as a material object, since writing itself cannot be straightforwardly conceived as a material thing.'[127] Ayers writes that although 'the cognate terms material and materialist […] can[not] unproblematically converge', the book-as-object further problematises any strict separation between them.[128] At the same time, this attention to the material inevitably introduces a paradox that Ayers also succinctly raises: 'to evoke the material is always at the same time unavoidably, hazily, to evoke the immaterial – some contrasting essence or quality excluded from materiality.'[129] The interleaf becomes paradigmatic of this 'dual optic', a chiasmus-like reversal of the material and the immaterial.[130] It is 'tangible intangible,' simultaneously, without a conjunction but separated by a blank 'space of relation'. Howe's formal configuration of her 'material,' adapted from collage and early modern textual practices, is likewise concerned with the 'relational space' – 'the thing that's alive with something from somewhere else' – that produces coincidences and affinities, based not on identicality but on similarity, as I discussed in the previous section.[131] These 'spaces', both textual and virtual, represent instants of arrested articulation also disturb the continuum of past and present, allowing 'configurations waiting from forever to be spoken'; they are spaces in which the dialectical image can emerge.[132]

I have tarried with the im/material aspects of the interleaf in order to frame an argument I wish to propose about the status of aura in Howe's work. I want to return to two phrases in the above quotation: the 'spectral scrap' and its possession of an 'enchanted aura'. Aura, of course, traces its etymology back to the Greek and Latin word for 'breath' and 'air'; only later, during the advent of Spiritualism in the nineteenth-century, did it come to denote supernatural emanations from people and objects. In her brilliant essay, 'Benjamin's Aura', Miriam Bratu Hansen observes Benjamin's curious disavowal of the esoteric context of the aura, which he would have been familiar with, even though these properties come to the fore in his writings on photography, where 'he was able to think [the] salient features of auratic

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[127] David Ayers, 'Materialism and the Book', *Poetics Today,* 24.4 (Winter 2003), pp. 759-780 (p. 759). Ayers adds, 'the book is now haunted by the notion of materialism', ibid.
[128] Ibid., p. 760.
[129] Ibid., p. 763.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Susan Howe, *The Midnight* (New York: New Directions, 2003), p. 57. Further references are to *TM*.
[132] 'THERE ARE NOT LEAVES […]', *Europe of Trusts*, p. 14.

experience – temporal disjunction, the shock-like confrontation with an alien self – as asymmetrically entwined, rather than simply incompatible with technological reproducibility.'[133] Later in *The Midnight,* Howe returns to the interleaf in 'Scare Quotes II'. Howe writes, '[t]he tissue's impalpable nature is uncannily perverse': 'in one position the filmy fabric takes on the properties of the title page, in another the properties of the frontispiece. Added to this change in particulars, what I see has the sense of touch'.[134] Here the interleaf has a hallucinatory effect (or affect) confusing to the senses; it is an almost photo-sensitive medium that can '[take] on the properties of the title page' in one configuration and 'in another the properties of the frontispiece.'[135] Howe's interleaf thus has three highly significant qualities: first, it is an obsolete remnant from a prior mode of technical reproduction; second, it is a photograph taken by a Xerox machine; third, from Howe's later description, the interleaf is itself 'photographic'. The interleaf is overwritten by its technical reproducibility. Strictly speaking, Howe's interleaf cannot be said to possess an aura in the sense that Benjamin describes in 'The Work of Art' essay. Yet, Howe writes, it has 'acquired an enchanted aura'.[136] Of course, Howe is not deploying the term in strict accord with Benjamin's essay, but her assertion that it has *acquired* an aura evokes new possibilities for Benjamin's concept. If an aura can be acquired, then it cannot be said to have died with the onslaught of technological reproduction. The survival of the aura in Howe's text perfectly accords with Benjamin's notion of the afterlife as I have described it earlier in this study. How, then, is an aura acquired? Howe writes that it is 'acquired […] quite apart from its original utilitarian function', suggesting that an object might obtain an aura once it has lost its use-value. What Benjamin did not fully account for in the 'Work of Art' essay was that technologies of reproduction advance so rapidly that previous technologies are 'rendered obsolete' almost as quickly as they emerge, and are replaced by some newer, more 'technological' technology. If the aura faded with the advent of photography and mass reproduction, it also returns in the becoming-obsolete of certain reproduced objects. If, as Benjamin writes, every work of art – even auratic ones – has an inherent reproducibility, then it might be said, at least in the context of Howe's work, that every work possesses a certain inherent 'auraticity', the potential to impart an aura at some

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[133] Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Benjamin's Aura', *Critical Inquiry*, 34.2 (Winter 2007), pp. 336-375 (p. 350). Howe's work has often been discussed in terms of occultism. See '"Needing to Summon the Others": Archival Research as Séance in Susan Howe's *Spontaneous Particulars*', *William Carlos Williams Review*, 31.2 (Fall 2014), pp. 175-199.
[134] 'Scare Quotes II', p. 144.
[135] Ibid.
[136] *TM*, n.p.

place or time. The reproduced work acquires an aura under two conditions that Howe describes: first, when it departs from its 'original utilitarian function'; second, when the object, and the technologies that reproduced it, have faded into the distance – the very distance that constitutes the aura.

2.4 Lace and Allegory

The interleaf cannot be photographed in isolation: without the pages that surround it, the interleaf would be absorbed onto a grainy but blank page. Howe makes visible the interleaf's transparency, its approach toward absence, by photographing it alongside (on top of) the title page. It gives the impression of temporal distance, a fading into and out of visibility, exactly as Benjamin defines aura in 'Little History of Photography': 'a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance [*Gespinst,* also apparition or semblance) of a distance, however near it may be'.[137] This echoes his earlier description of beauty, in his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities,* which is 'neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object *in its veil'*.[138] The interleaf thus not only has an aura, it is also a figure of aura itself, an alternate 'veil' with 'mist' instead of 'breath'. As one reads further into *The Midnight*, however, the interleaf also becomes analogous to the curtain, the bed hanging, and lace, each of which provide their own modes of visuality and correlative obscurity. I have already discussed the interleaf, which in its 'mist-like transience' intimates materialisation and dissipation, a double movement in Howe's lyric compositions. It foreshadows disappearance and intimates a future distance in which the object may vanish out of sight. In Howe's poetic exploration of lace, however, she shows how poetry can incorporate absence into its weave.

For all its pronounced metaphysical qualities, it is by now apparent that Howe's work demonstrates a preoccupation with materiality. I have discussed some aspects of this focus on the material in the previous section, but I also want to explore Howe's use of literal material: fabric – for example, William of Orange's bloody shirt in *The Midnight*, or a scrap of Sarah Pierpont Edwards's dress in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* and *That This*. From the outset of *The Midnight,* Howe establishes an analogue between swathes of cloth used in early modern bed hangings, and the book. The etymological connection linking text and textile, the Latin *texere,* is well known and by now ubiquitous in the vocabulary and practice of criticism, perhaps most recognisably in Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author,' which

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[137] Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', *SW* 2:2, pp. 507-521 (p. 518).
[138] 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*', p. 353

famously asserted that 'the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres'.[139] Howe's tissue-text certainly has certainly absorbed Barthes' dictum. Howe takes this shared etymology so seriously that it is difficult to unravel one from the other. Texts can be worn – Jonathan Edwards, a recurring figure in Howe's work, pinned notes for his sermons, written on scrap paper, to his clothes – and textiles can be read. Books are like garments for Howe: they contain the material traces of those who 'wore' them. The materiality of the book is also intimately linked to the materiality of language: 'there's a level at which words are spirit and paper is skin. That's the fascination with archives. There's still a bodily trace.'[140] The material trace is thus a kind of silent language for what – what Benjamin might call the 'mute language of things': like writing, the material object provides a site of contact between the past and the present.[141] Unlike the aura, which maintains the appearance of a distance, the trace 'is [the] appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. [...] In the trace, we gain possession of the thing'.[142]

Arranged in an alternating sequence of diptych-like poems, 'Bed Hangings I,' 'Scare Quotes I,' 'Bed Hangings II,' 'Scare Quotes II,' and a final section, 'Kidnapped,' *The Midnight* goes beyond the confines of structuralist intertextuality. Indeed, as critics such as Barbara Clayton, Nancy Miller, and Kathryn Sullivan Kruger suggest, text and textile are more interwoven than even Barthes indicates, conjoined by mythic origins found in Greek figures such as Ariadne (Kruger, Miller), Penelope (Clayton), and Helen of Troy (Kruger).[143] These feminist readings trace female cultural and material production through different poetics of weaving, a creative act punitively thought of as 'women's work.' In a section titled '*The Age of Resplendent Lace*', a fragmentary poem in the stream of 'Bed Hangings I' Howe incorporates allusions to Penelope's work, a shroud for Odysseus's father, Laertes, which she weaves during the day and unravels at night, as an index to the unfinished work of

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[139] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-148 (p. 146).
[140] Howe interviewed by Maureen N. McLane, 'The Art of Poetry', *The Paris Review*, 203 (Winter 2012) <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6189/susan-howe-the-art-of-poetry-no-97-susan-howe> [accessed 11 May 2018].
[141] On Language', p. 71.
[142] *AP*, [M16a,3], p. 447.
[143] See Barbara Clayton, *A Penelopean Poetics: Reweaving the Feminine in Homer's* Odyssey (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004); Nancy K. Miller, 'Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic', *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. by Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 270-296; Kathryn Sullivan Kruger, *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2001).

mourning, in addition to wider references to female weavers. Under a section called 'Cutwork', Howe introduces 'the earliest account of bed hangings':

> The earliest account of bed hangings is in a legend from the 11th century. After a run of bad luck a seamstress named Thorgunna got fed up and left her home somewhere in the stormy Outer Hebrides. In England it didn't take long for special notice of the immigrant's fantastically embroidered needlework to get around. Soon she was in danger of being promoted to the witch category. Trouble followed trouble until she warned that ownership of her hangings could mean curtains. Coulds are iffy. Throwing caution to the winds, she either burned or tossed her tapestries out. It's an aesthetics of erasure.[144]

Weaving and needlework appear here as a distinctly female art form and, therefore, a supposedly dangerous and suspect one twinned with the supernatural. The anecdote of Thorgunna and Howe's 'aesthetics of erasure' calls to attention the ways in which women's creative output has been met with distrust and censorship, but also how silence can be used as an aesthetic means of expression – a prime example of this would be one of Howe's avatars, Emily Dickinson her stuttering poetics of the dash.

By placing her motivic focus on textile material, Howe establishes a view of the materiality of the text which emphasises its sensuous qualities. The text begins to take on the visual qualities of fabric, so that text and textile supersede their shared linguistic roots and become analogous. Howe's reading of objects gestures toward a communication beyond language whose transmission can only ever be partial. Howe presents lace as the painstaking construction of gaps where the indeterminacy between absence and presence is inherent to its form. In lacemaking these gaps are called 'eyelets', an indication of the intricate networks of association in Howe's texts. *The Midnight* presents lace as an enigmatic substance that is both natural and artificial, mimetic of spiderwebs in both its appearance and its vocabulary, as with 'gossamer', a fine, gauzy silk lace also used to describe the filmy silk of spiderlings. Such a substance recalls the descriptive terms of the interleaf in Howe's interleaf-preface as 'tangible intangible' and 'approaching transparency'. Lace is emblematic of Howe's preference for rich, refractive imagery that seems to ceaselessly coincide with their mode of representation. First, I want to take a look at a poem in 'Bed Hangings II' called '*The Age of*

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[144] 'Scare Quotes I', p. 45.

Resplendent Lace', in order to adumbrate an 'anatomy of lace' as it relates to the construction of Howe's poetic language:

> Penelope is presented as
>
> working a shroud for Laertes
>
> the father of Ulysses
>
> Cobweb gossamer ephemera
>
> miscellaneous bundle 34
>
> The shirt worn by William
>
> the Silent when he fell by
>
> an assassin is still preserved
>
> at the Hague[145]

Howe links lace to an always deferred work of mourning. As I alluded earlier, the etymological overlap of text and textile has led to a critical interest in figures of weaving and the practice of writing. For Howe, whose source material comes from the fringes of institutional archives and family (specifically maternal) inheritance, the slippage between text and shroud becomes more apparent. 'Ephemera', which appears in the second stanza, is yet another multivalent, chiral word, a category that names itself: it can mean documents, usually printed matter or notes, 'miscellaneous bundle[s]', whose use is temporary, but, of course, it also shares a linguistic origin with the 'ephemeral,' denoting a state of impermanence and transitoriness.[146] Caught again in the cobweb gossamer, it may do us well to recall that cobwebs are the products of temporal accretion and abandoned, uninhabited corners where 'bundle 34' might be waiting. Howe links the moment 'when he fell by/ an assassin' to the shirt, which, we are informed, 'is still preserved at the Hague'; this juxtaposition traces the moment where historical actuality is uncovered in the 'matter' of fact and where poetry captures the instant where an event '[becomes] historical posthumously [...] through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years'.[147]

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[145] 'Bed Hangings II', p. 93.
[146] 'Ephemera' comes from the Greek *ephēmeros*, which means 'lasting only a day'.
[147] 'On the Concept', p. 397.

Like the interleaf, the lace shirt also has an aura, the same aura as Schelling's coat that Benjamin describes in 'Little History of Photography' which will 'pass into immortality […] the shape it has borrowed from its wearer'.[148] The interleaf and William the Silent's shirt mark the point where aura (the appearance of a distance) and trace (the appearance of nearness) vanish into one another.

The final stanza quoted above presents a historical encounter through a properly material object. With this in mind, Howe's impression of William I's doomed shirt is of a temporary and temporal shroud (recalling Penelope and Laertes in the first stanza) suggesting a moment of time compressed in an image. The ironic hesitation that precedes the final line 'at the Hague' indicates another category of the material as mere information or data. This, juxtaposed with the catalogue entry, 'miscellaneous bundle 34' invites the reader to speculate on the archival designation that lies in store for each of us like a citational *memento mori*. As Howe shows us, however, every inscription bears a trace, even if, ghost-like, it can't be seen. This is no better illustrated than by the poem quoted at length above. '*The Age of Resplendent Lace'* is a found poem, taken from a volume by Fanny Bury Palliser called *A History of Lace*, published in the nineteenth century, whose description of William of Orange's (also known as William the Silent) shirt ends with a detail that one would expect of Howe herself. It appears as follows:

> The shirt worn by William the Silent when he fell by the assassin is still preserved at the Hague; it is trimmed with a lace of thick linen stitches, drawn and worked over in a style familiar to those acquainted with the earlier Dutch pictures.[149]

Unstitching the fabric of her 'reference material', Howe grafts its quotations onto her poems, or rather her 'strapwork trellis sentence[s]'.[150] Like Dutch lace, Howe 'draw[s] and work[s] over' the material of the past and the charge of immediacy contained therein. Like Benjamin, she tears historical objects from their context and resituates them in the present, but her 'historical materialist' practice is framed within a feminine practice of 'cutwork' and 'scissorwork'. As Howe writes of her mother, actress and playwright Mary Manning, 'she loved to embroider facts', suggesting that the imaginative act, of writing in particular, can

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[148] Benjamin qtd. in Hansen, p. 340.
[149] Fanny Bury Palliser, *A History of Lace* (London: Sampson Low, Son, & Marston, 1865), p. 221. The title of Howe's poem is italicised in the original text.
[150] 'Bed Hangings II', p. 105.

be seen as a form of precision 'needlework'.[151] In 'Bed Hangings I' Howe presents an incantatory list of fabrics: 'Alapeen Paper Patch Muslin/ Calico Camlet Dimity Fustian', names that in their obsolescence are no longer readily recognisable, reduced to unfamiliar sound textures.[152] In particular, Howe chooses textiles that are highly intricate and ornamental, popular in the seventeenth century from which she pulls much of her poetic material, such as turkeywork, arras and the 'opus scissum' lace favoured by Elizabeth I. By now it may be apparent that Howe focuses mainly on Dutch and English forms of lace and its influence on the new vernacular of American textiles that drew on both traditions. Beneath the surface image of lace is a material history of material that tells of the Dutch and English colonisation of the Americas. The silk and lace trades were some of the very first industries established in early seventeenth-century America. Raw silk would have been imported from China by the English, French, and Dutch East India companies, which would be spun into thread required for the warp.[153] Howe also acknowledges the influence that indigenous styles of needlework had on colonial settlers: 'Perilous quillwork needlework' refers to the use of porcupine and bird quills as embroidery needles. As Montgomery points out, Howe 'makes use of specialist vocabulary drawn from […] the material culture of New England […] "Quillwork" applies to […] Native Americans; needlework is part of the Western tradition.'[154] The nature of this encounter between these two styles is 'perilous' for the people violently displaced by colonial conquest and incoming settlers.[155] Fabric, and the fabric of our vocabulary to describe it, is rooted in place, and can, more than other artefacts, attest to its history and production. Howe shows that even the flimsiest of material is the expression of a site-specific dialect. But this language is 'half-/ articulate' and 'specular as morning', a fragmented medium. 'Every mortal has a non-communicating material self – a waistcoat or embroidered doublet folded up, pressed down, re-folded to fit snugly inside. Incommunicado.'[156] Howe's description of 'non-communicating material' recalls Benjamin's mystical language writings on 'the language of things' and 'mute nature'. In *The Midnight*, the anatomy of lace intersects with Howe's own poetic practice. The evocative vocabulary of lacemaking and needlework provides the material for the multiplicity of

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[151] 'Scare Quotes II', p. 76.
[152] 'Bed Hangings I', p. 4.
[153] See Natalie Rothstein, 'Silk in European and American Trade before 1783: A Commodity of Commerce or a Frivolous Luxury?' *Textiles in Trade: Proceedings of the Textile Society of America Biennial Symposium* (September 1990), pp 1-14.
[154] Montgomery, p. 158.
[155] 'Kidnapped', *TM*, p. 158.
[156] 'Scare Quotes I', p. 60.

meanings such as 'pattern', which refers to both an instructive 'exemplar' and the arrangement of recurrences and coincidences in Howe's texts. Lace is revealed to be the painstaking construction of gaps, 'eyelets' that provide access to kaleidoscopic perspectives. Such gaps are interlinked by multiple narrative threads:

> Counterforce bring me wild hope
>
> non-connection is itself distinct
>
> connection numerous surviving
>
> fair trees wrought with a needle
>
> the merest decorative suggestion
>
> in what appears to be sheer white
>
> muslin a tree fair hunted Daphne
>
> Thinking is willing you are wild
>
> to the weave not to material itself[157]

We find, again, the pattern of 'pattern,' used repeatedly in poems throughout the text. This time, Howe describes her outsider position as 'wild/ to the weave,' that is, the dictates of the pattern, working outside the textual line with 'material itself'.[158] Daphne is the Greek nymph transformed by Apollo into a tree, a plant that can itself be transformed into paper; coincidence or not, this allusion ('a mere decorative suggestion') reveals the protean nature of Howe's shifting text whose legibility is constantly woven up to a point of interruption and is undone again, only to be taken up by another thread. When a gap is encountered, language exceeds itself, oversignifying. The model of negativity hinted at in the preface to *The Midnight* fully emerges here, identifying absence as negative presence, 'non-connection is itself distinct/connection,' from which the logic of Howe's aesthetic unfurls, recalling the previous section's discussion of Benjamin's concept of nonsensuous similarity, which 'connects' two objects through their uncanny distinction from one another.[159] In an interview, Howe adumbrates her method. I have quoted parts of this elsewhere, but it bears repeating in full:

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[157] 'Bed Hangings I', p. 17.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid.

So I start in a place with fragments, lines and marks, stops and gaps, and then I have more ordered sections, and then things break up again […] you try to order them and to explain something, and the explanation breaks free of itself. I think a lot of my work is about breaking free: starting free and being captured and breaking free again and being capture again […] the content is the process […][160]

Content, typically conceived as the 'material' produced by a work and bounded by form is here far more dynamic and mutable. If the content – the only thing empirically accessible to the reader – is also the 'process', then the resultant work remains open, active, unfinished, unfinalized. This 'process' consists in the poet's encounter with something other and her attempt to inscribe this encounter which is always somehow incomplete, full of 'stops and gaps'. In this sense, Howe's work, constantly 'in process', resembles the shroud Penelope continually begins in the day and unravels at night; the shroud will never be the same each time, it will always be altered by its unravelling and its re-working. As I mentioned earlier, the semiotics of weaving is incredibly important to the construction and understanding of Howe's work. If, as we have had many occasions to observe, the appearance of textiles, especially diaphanous, semi-translucent ones, is analogous to the highly articulate networks of association that characterise the structure of Howe's work, then the trope that corresponds to and facilitates her linguistic embroidery is the allegory. Although allegory has recently seen a surge in critical interest, it has for many decades been regarded a form as obsolete to literature as the interleaf is to print technology. The appearance of curtains, lace, and the theatrical scrim are all consonant with the privileged figure of the allegory, which has, almost since its conception, been associated with the veil, from St Paul to Dante and, more recently, Suzanne Conklin Akbari:

[…] allegory conveys meaning that cannot be expressed directly through ordinary language. That is, by avoiding the limitations inherent in literal language, allegory creates meaning within the reader, bypassing the inevitable disintegration of meaning as it passes through the obscuring veil of language. The paradox, of course, is that the veil which makes the transmission of meaning – the revelation – possible.[161]

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[160] Foster interview, p. 166.
[161] Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 9.

Gerald L. Bruns develops a similar image of allegory that recalls the language of *The Midnight*:

> We may figure allegory as the curtain that conceals (in order to be made radiant by) a sanctuary. The curtain mediates the light of what is hidden […] without the curtain we would be unable to see anything at all: it would be as if nothing were there. Allegory is an instance of darkening by means of words […] we cannot assimilate the light, only dissimulate it, or enlighten ourselves as to what is present by darkening it […][162]

Not only is allegory commonly 'allegorised' by the veil or curtain, it also posits the notion of 'darkening' as a medium of visibility. Within the description of allegory, allegory itself must take place: this is the aporia of allegory which calls representation itself into question. Howe's use of fabric imagery can consequently be said to be the imagery of allegory, the imagery of representation as such. The images of this fabric, some of them visual images taken from archives, are unfinished, broken off, frayed, or folded [Fig. 4].

In *The Midnight*, Howe's images of material reach a certain multivalent density which occludes traditional methods of analysis, to the point where even the word 'multivalence', which indicates many meanings, cannot be used without noticing that it also contains a deep-pleated decorative drape: the word 'valence'. In her brilliant essay on *The Midnight*¸ Kate Lilley remarks that in 'sacred contexts both 'veil' and 'valance' are often used to intimate divine mysteries and life after death, beyond the vale of tears'.[163] Lilley further draws attention to the play on the words 'valence and valance', noting that the former, according to the *OED*, is defined as:

> [S]ignifying the "emotional force or significance, specifically the attraction or repulsion with which an individual invests an object or event," as well as "valour, courage, especially Irish" and "some thin woven fabric", while the latter, "valance", also spelled "vallains", is glossed as a "border of drapery hanging round the canopy of a bed or veil"'.[164]

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[162] Gerald L. Bruns, 'Allegory and Satire: A Rhetorical Meditation', *New Literary History*, 11.1 (Autumn 1979): pp.121-132 (p. 125).
[163] Kate Lilley, 'Blackwork: On Susan Howe's The Midnight', *HEAT Magazine,* 2 (2009-2010), pp. 11-33 (p. 15).

[164] *OED* qtd. in Lilley, p. 15.

The Midnight is, in many senses, a sort of rebus of the connotations of 'material', using verbal and visual images of fabric to poetically interrogate the meaning of materiality and map the organic traces of history in objects: the 'matter' of fact. Lilley observes how bed hangings 'metonymically indicate the richness and value of what is contained within book, bed, stage, mortal life.'[165] I read this astute inventory of *The Midnight* as a supremely Baroque symbolic landscape, supported by the Shakespearean epigraphs and images of Elizabethan ruff collars. England, and, more emphatically, colonial New England, which provides a historical locus for many of Howe's works, may not seem to harbour any features of the Baroque, which is normally considered to be a Catholic idiom beginning with the Council of Trent. However, Austin Warren proposes the term 'colonial Baroque' for both English and colonial North American poets normally cited under the stylistic or period terms as metaphysical, 'cavalier', Elizabethan and Jacobean. Warren describes the characteristics of the 'colonial Baroque' as follows:

> It subsumes the prose of Andrewes, Burton, and Brown, the poetry of Quarles, Benlowes, Cleveland, Crashaw, and Donne. Its philosophy is Christian and supernaturalist and incarnational, a philosophy which admits of miracle and transcensions [sic] of common sense, hence of surprise; its aesthetic, by appropriate consequence, endorses bold figures, verbal and imaginal, such figures as the pun, the oxymoron, the paradox, the metaphor which links events from seemingly alien, discontinuous spheres. It likes audacious mixtures, – the shepherds and the magi; the colloquial and the erudite. If it provides ecstasies, it allows also of ingenuities: anagrams and acrostics and poems shaped like obelisks or Easter wings. […] The baroque […] is not absent from – but only restricted by – Puritanism and Nonconformity […][166]

Warren, whose description quoted above could just as easily apply to Howe's oeuvre, writes that elegy was the chief poetic form used by New England poets. Such elegies made used of 'incise[d] skulls, skeletons, and cherubs; and funeral verse was requisite not only for addition to the memorial slate but, at more ambitious length, for printing as a black-bordered broadside' [Fig. 3].[167] Here the iconoclastic allegory of New England's early colonial settlers dovetails with Walter Benjamin's concept of German baroque tragedy or *Trauerspiel.* In

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[165] Lilley, pp. 14-15.
[166] Austin Warren, *Rage for Order: Essays in Criticism* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1948), p. 2.
[167] Ibid., p. 5.

brief, the *Trauer-* (mourning) -*spiel* (play) is both a mourning play and a 'play' of mourning (this double meaning holds true in both English and German). The excessive, often gratuitous lamentations, martyrdoms, assassinations, interminable death scenes, the proliferation of skulls and corpses (Benjamin mentions *Hamlet*) – are all explicitly *staged* and draw attention to themselves as such, underlining the 'artifice' of the work of art and its utter ephemerality. The mourning play emerges out of the ruins of ancient tragedy and medieval mystery plays whose ritual significance and transcendent culmination are evacuated by secularisation and can only appear as fragmentary emblems. While classical tragedy's structural imperative is catharsis, a purging of emotion, and a restoration of knowledge (*anagnorisis*), nothing could be further from the *Trauerspiel* and baroque allegory in general, which introjects everything it encounters. Similarly, although baroque allegory incorporates the codified imagery of Christ's Passion, the mystery play's narrative of redemption is at best regarded with ambivalence in the shadow of the Thirty Years' War. Without going too deeply into the Counter-Reformation, tragedy and the Christian mystery play can be said to differ from *Trauerspiel* on the point of sacrifice and the structures of history they respectively engender. Christine Buci-Glucksmann summarises the *Trauerspiel*'s incompatibility with its antecedents: 'Whereas in Greek tragedy the sacrifice of the hero – his act of seeing fate – permits the reconstitution of order, Trauerspiel represents 'a history of the sufferings of the world', a decadent, Saturnian history of mourning and melancholia'.[168] I suggest that 'order' here is meant not only in the sense of a re-stabilised structure of sovereignty (classical tragedy) but also the 'order' of meaning issued from figurative language; the meaning that metaphor commands to be seen. In baroque tragedy, meaning is dispersed, it 'falls from emblem to emblem', and order is not so much reconstituted (into a unity) as it is re-collected (in fragments). This movement of dispersal and re-collection is allegorical.

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[168] Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1994), p. 6. See also Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Boston: University of Massachussetts Press, 2001).
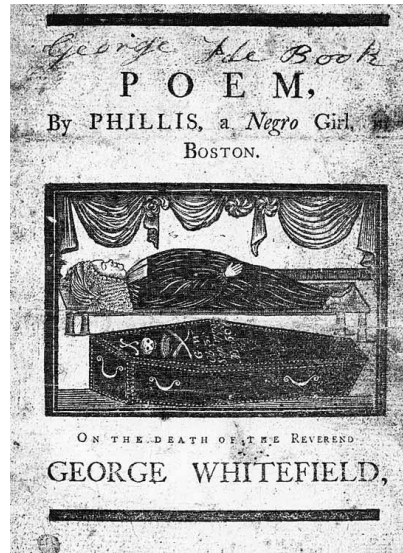
Figure 3. George Whitefield's Burial. Woodcut from Phillis [Wheatley], *An Elegiac Poem on the Death of that celebrated Divine and eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and learned George Whitefield* (Boston: Ezekiel Russell, 1770). Reprinted in *The Midnight*.
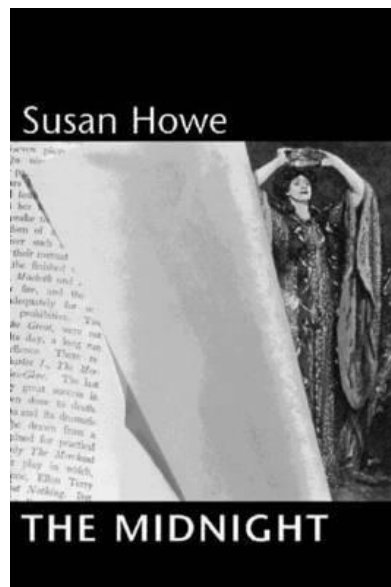

Figure 4. Cover illustration, *The Midnight*.

The elegy is the poetic form of mourning *par excellence.* The *memento mori* of incised skulls and black-bordered broadsides are characteristic of the general temper of the Baroque, including Benjamin's analysis of the German *Trauerspiel*, whose authors were also working within the context of the Reformation: Howe mentions George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards at the outset of 'Scare Quotes I' as major figures in the Second Great Awakening, a movement of 'intercolonial religious revival' which emphasised a strict Calvinist dialectic

of 'ecstatic union and the law'.[169] Howe quotes the definition of 'AWAKE' and 'AWAKENING' as they appear in Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language*.[170] Buoyed by associative relation, Howe suggests that this spiritual awakening permeated early American settlers' understanding of language: 'When Europe enters the space of its margin, the "Kingdom of God in America" receives European memory into itself'. America here is figured as an afterlife of 'European memory'; settlers and religious dissidents broke away from their native countries only to produce new, intermingling echoes and reverberations of what they thought of as the past. Though it was called the 'New World', the colonial project was, in fact, a collision between the native population, who had been there for thousands of years, and white settlers who brought the European past with them.

The Calvinist doctrine ('law') of predestination that occluded salvation for all coincided with an obsession with death. One of Jonathan Edwards's sermons is exemplary of the Puritan iconography of death:

> Death temporal is a shadow of eternal death. The agonies, the pains, the groans and gasps of death, the pale, horrid, ghastly appearance of the corpse, its being laid in a dark and silent grave, there putrefying and rotting and becoming exceedingly loathsome and being eaten by worms is an image of hell. And the bodies continuing in the grave, and never rising more in this world is to shadow forth the eternity and misery of hell.[171]

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes that 'Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside, Baudelaire evokes it from within.'[172] Edwards's description of death is surely such an allegory that 'sees the corpse from within' and which predates Baudelaire considerably. Despite the ghoulish image of bodily decomposition, Edwards impresses on his audience an even less agreeable alternative: the eternal miseries of hell. There is a deep ambiguity in this comparison, however. On the one hand, the gruesome portrait of 'death temporal' is contrasted with the infinite suffering of hell; yet in this contrast is also a comparison by which the death of the body is quite literally an 'image of hell'. Put simply, hell is eternal death and death is temporal hell. Indeed, the misery of hell lies not simply in

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[169] 'Scare Quotes', p. 43.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Elisabeth Louise Roark, *Artists of Colonial America* (Westport, CT; London: Greenwood Press, 2003), p. 56.
[172] *AP*, [J56,2], p. 329.

the experience of death but more specifically a continual state of bodily decay – of the decaying body or flesh as a prison in contradistinction to spiritual and mortal union of the elect on Judgement Day.[173] The union of body and soul is the union of opposites, a relationship of nonsensuous similarity.

The ornamental, highly stylised religious art typical of the Catholic Baroque was, for the New England Puritan, concentrated in the 'image' of the word. Not just the word, however, but especially the name. Anagrams were not just composed by an elegist after a person's death but were frequently written by the individuals while they themselves were alive. This practice was not only a creative, ludic pursuit in a culture that restricted (but did not, as Warren crucially notes, forbid) artistic expression, it was also linked to the contemplation of mortality encouraged by ministers like Edwards and Mather. One of the most popular modes of elegy at the time was the anagram, in which the name of the deceased was rearranged to spell out a secret, hidden meaning communicated to the living. In *The Birth-mark* Howe presents the 'auto-elegies' of Thomas Shepard, a seventeenth-century Evangelical minister, anagrams composed of the letters in his own name (inscrutable ciphers bordering on the nonsensical: 'O, a map's Tresh'd', and 'Arm'd as the shop').[174] It is an instance of 'the widespread Puritan trope of the soul as a "text" to be read for signs of conformity with other pious texts deriving from the Bible'.[175] Anagrams also provided the framework for the sanctification of the deceased.[176] The iconoclastic culture of Puritan settlers in colonial New England, which forbid 'graven images' (especially the theatre), turned to the written word whose seeming austerity belied its iconic potential.

In her essay on Chris Marker written three years later, Howe comments at greater links on the anagram, writing that the 'American Puritan theologians and historians […] were obsessed with anagrams'. The anagram is one locus of what Howe sees as a North American literary tradition from Cotton Mather to Emerson and Dickinson through to William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson and John Cage: each, Howe explains, has 'inherit[ed] this feeling for letters as colliding image-objects and divine messages'.[177] Howe subsequently declares

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[173] 'Scare Quotes I', p. 43.
[174] Howe, *The Birth-mark*, p. 45.
[175] Jeffrey Hammond, 'Friendly Ghosts: Celebrations of the Living Dead in Early New England', Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), pp. 40-56 (p. 53).
[176] For further discussion, see Jeffrey A. Hammond, *The American Puritan Elegy: A Literary and Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[177] Howe, *Sorting Facts*, p. 49.

an affinity with Walter Benjamin, who 'was also attracted to the idea that single letters in a word or name could be rearranged to cabalistically reveal a hidden purpose'.[178] In other words, 'the entrance of the messianic into the material object' and an allegorical secret to be unveiled.[179] Like William I's shirt, the anagram-elegy becomes an icon, but here it is arranged from fragments of the name – 'the language of language', writes Benjamin – whose letters spell out an image. The elegy as relic in a time of iconoclasm thus refigures Edwards's corpse, a corpse in pieces at that. In the anagram, writes Benjamin, 'word, syllable and sound are emancipated from any context of traditional meaning and are flaunted as objects which can be exploited for allegorical purposes'.[180]

The Baroque allegory does not prove, however, that there is no meaning or that expression is futile, as it would be easy to glean from a cursory reading of Benjamin's text. Allegory, deriving from the Greek words *allos* ('other') and *agoreuein* ('to speak'), is a speaking 'otherwise'; it incorporates something other in place of another, a concrete image for a concept that cannot be spoken of directly, but 'outside' the *agora* or marketplace. Because the concept – love, death, and so on – cannot be expressed because it is abstract and affective, the allegory further incorporates the absent other, the lost object of the melancholic. In a prose-poem titled '*Dark Day of Words*', Howe writes:

> 'Park: Originally in England a portion of forest enclosed for keeping deer, trapped or otherwise caught in the open forest, and their increase.' This is the first sentence of Frederick Law Olmsted's essay titled 'Park' in the *New American Cyclopedia; A Popular Dictionary of General Knowledge* (1861). Somewhere I read that when he was sent away from home as a small child and took long solitary walks as a remedy for sadness, he particularly enjoyed the edges of woods. So much for the person. He started out a few pages ago. Now no one living remembers the fall of that voice from sound into silence. Who can tell what empirical perceptions really are? Veridical and delusive definitions shade into one another. All words run along the margins of their secrets.[181]

In 'Scare Quotes I', Howe follows the life of Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect responsible for Central Park. We later learn that his mother, Charlotte Olmsted, died 'in 1826

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178 Ibid.
179 Howe, Keller interview, p. 29.
180 *OGTD*, p. 207.
181 'Scare Quotes I', p. 48.

[when] her first-born six-year-old son was sent away to various locations around the Connecticut countryside.'[182] Howe quotes 'a brief autobiographical fragment', written by Olmsted 'as a remedy for insomnia':

> My mother died when I was so young that I have but a tradition of memory rather than the faintest recollection. […] if I was asked if I remembered her I could say: 'Yes; I remember playing on the grass and looking up at her while she sat sewing under a tree.' I now only remember that I did so remember her, but it has always been a delight to see a woman sitting under a tree, sewing and minding a child.[183]

In the midst of this biographical narrative Howe reveals that '[Olmsted's] first 'thoroughly rural parish' was in Guildford where I live but in 2002 it's a suburb.'[184] After reproducing Olmsted's 'memory' of his mother, Howe inserts of a photograph of her grandmother with her mother, aunt and uncle (John Manning – Howe discovers the interleaf in his copy of *Master of Ballantrae*) in a park. Through this juxtaposition Howe substitutes her own deceased mother ('she loved to embroider facts') for Olmsted's (his delight in women at needlework), a connection also imbued by Guildford. In the same section, Howe writes, 'my mother's close relations treated their books as transitional objects (judging by the few survivors remaining in my possession)'.[185] Later, Howe psychoanalytically wonders if Olmsted's 'love for nature split off from his relation to his mother', casting his mother as the lost object of Olmsted's melancholy, the source of his 'solitary walks' and 'sadness'.[186] Taken together, it becomes clear that for Howe, too, the book is a 'transitional object', in the sense of the interleaf, the 'transitional space,' the 'zone of contention' in the text, in addition to the autobiographical context out of which Howe writes. It is clear that Howe had Winnicott in mind, who conceptualized the transitional object as a blanket or stuffed toy through which a child copes with the absence of their mother. Santner incisively recognises the work of the allegorist at play in the child's selection of transitional objects, remarking that 'the infant at play begins to look more like Dürer's allegorical figure of Melancholia surrounded by stranded props and artifacts'.[187] Howe interweaves her epigraphic references to Lady Macbeth with a Kleinian memory of her own mother: 'Search forever, you'll never

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182 Ibid., p. 67.
183 Ibid., pp. 66-67.
184 Ibid., p. 67.
185 Ibid., p. 60.
186 Ibid., p. 84.
187 Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 26.

scratch this one's grave innermost surfeit. [...] The good mother (drop of rosewater) and her coeval ties to the murderer (bowl of poison) this is the way you splinter things when you're in a position of abject melancholia.'[188] This 'splitting' is the characteristic of Melanie Klein's so-called 'paranoid-schizoid position' as well as is the defining characteristic of the allegorist[189]. Howe 'introjects' and 'projects' (as poetic montage/collage) the vast corpus/corpse of the books, narratives, and signatures of an other, whether that other is a family member or a stranger from the past. Fragmentation, as a form of breaking things apart, is also a form of Kleinian projection, by which the allegorist frantically tries to rescue by putting the pieces into some kind of meaningful, revitalising and redeeming, but utterly 'other' order.

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[188] 'Scare Quotes I', p. 65. This is also proleptic of another quotation. When Howe stages her near-encounter with Dickinson's manuscripts in the Houghton Library, she copies out the titles of the manuscripts she intends to see: for example, 'H50-52 and H131-32 (the poems in Fascicle 34) including 'My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –' and 'Essential Oils - are wrung - The attar from the Rose', p. 126.

[189] For further exploration of the relationship between Benjamin's concept of allegory and object-relations theory, see Elizabeth Stewart, *Catastrophe and Survival: Walter Benjamin and Psychoanalysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Chapter Three

Trompe-l'oeil: **Genre,** *Flânerie***, and Perspective Teju Cole's** *Open City*

> Viewed from a certain distance, the great, simple outlines which define the storyteller stand out in him – or rather, they become visible in him, just as a human head or an animal's body may appear in a rock when it is viewed by an observer from the proper distance and angle. This distance and this angle of vision are prescribed for us by an experience which we may have almost every day.
>
> – Walter Benjamin 'The Storyteller'[1]
>
> Death is a perfection of the eye.
>
> – Teju Cole, *Open City*[2]

Wandering into Wall Street Station, Julius, the narrator of *Open City*, 'suspect[s] for a moment that the grand hall now confronting me […] was a trick of the eye'.[3] In *Open City*, monuments, extant and ruined, confront and intimidate the viewer; they appear and disappear according to the narrator's perspective. The reader who approaches this novel is inclined to look from the same perspective, only to find that such a view is indeed a 'trick of the eye'.[4] This 'trick of the eye' points toward the many configurations of seeing and vision that run through the novel, beginning with the novel's first epigraph: 'Death is a perfection of the eye'. Despite Cole's background as an art historian specialising in Netherlandish art with an emphasis on the work of Bruegel the Elder (1529-1569), to my knowledge no critic has remarked extensively on its relevance to Cole's fiction.[5] With this in mind, I wish to draw a connection between Cole's epigraph and the anamorphic skull in *The Ambassadors* (1553), Hans Holbein's painting from the same century. Only from a peculiar, singular, and

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[1] Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', *Selected Writings*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Edmund Jephcott et al, 4 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3, pp. 143-166 (p. 143).
[2] Teju Cole, *OC*, n.p.
[3] Ibid., p. 46.
[4] I use the term 'perspective' in its expanded sense to signal optic and narrative 'points of view' which are, to use Linda M. Shires's phrase, 'modes of viewing and knowing'. See Linda M. Shires, *Perspectives: Modes of Viewing and Knowing in Nineteenth-Century England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009). Shires explores ideals of classical perspective and their intersections in nineteenth-century writing, epistemologies of omniscience and changes to the lyric 'I'.
[5] Cole's scholarly interest is specifically in early modern humour and its use of allegory in parody. See Cole's chapter (published under the name Yemi Onafuwa), 'Exuberant Gluttony: Bruegel's Overeaters', *Parody and Festivity in Early Modern Art: Essays on Comedy as Social Vision*, ed. by David R Smith (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 99-111.

unnatural vantage point can the viewer see the skull in its legible dimension. At first glance Cole's epigraph may appear obscure, but in *Open City*, as in Holbein's painting, the conditions of such legibility are predicated on reading the encoded configuration of an image that can be recognised only from a particular and distorted perspective.[6] *Open City* is a novel that initially appears to consolidate three emergent genres: the post 9/11 novel, the cosmopolitan novel, and the 'Sebaldian novel'. Each genre is concerned with the method and ethics of representing relations – political, historical, and global; each also experiences a tension between aesthetics and the ethics of form. Yet there is an anamorphic figure of violence stretched beneath Cole's narrative that troubles and challenges the ethical aesthetics of the genres *Open City* appears to represent. This violence is hidden from the reader until the novel's final pages, where the narrative, up to that point, is revealed to be a 'trick of the eye' which urges the reader to interrogate their identification with and empathy for the unreliable narrator, a task that demands no less than a reorientation of perspective. In setting this challenge, Cole's novel itself provides a radical perspective that envisions the limits of an uncritical cosmopolitanism that exists in largely liberal discourses, the problematics of memorialisation, and the difficulties of transposing Sebald's aesthetics of history into a post-millennial American context.

In painting, *trompe-l'oeil* is a technique by which an optical illusion of depth and three-dimensionality is created through a forced perspective. Though it originated in ancient Greek and Roman murals, *trompe-l'oeil* reached its height in the Baroque period, when developments in science and subsequently philosophy gave prominence to the empirical practice of direct observation. The Baroque *trompe-l'oeil*, as Susan Merriam writes, was 'part of a broad phenomenon that indicate[d] a widespread cultural suspicion of vision's reliability' that asked the viewer 'to question the reliability of all images.'[7] *Open City* is an intensely visual novel, but one which constantly interrogates the limits of vision as well as how vision can be distorted on several layers: the narrator's often hallucinatory and disturbed optics – which I will explore in detail later – and the narrator's unreliable 'vision' of his own story which, consequently, raises questions of ethical representation in the novel, particularly the genres with which it is associated. While the *trompe-l'oeil* exposes the fabricated nature of representation, its success, according to Rolando Perez, depends on the conventional

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[6] *OC*, n.p.
[7] Susan Merriam, *Seventeenth-Century Flemish Garland Paintings: Still Life, Vision, and the Devotional Image* (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 71.

perspective of the viewer which 'limit[s] perception to frontal viewing'.[8] When viewed from 'front', *Open City* is a poetic exploration of historical contingency that reveals submerged, marginalised pasts that form the foundations of national myths, as when Julius describes the African Burial Ground that lies beneath lower Manhattan 'under office buildings, shops, streets, diners, pharmacies, all the endless hum of quotidian commerce and government'.[9] As Pieter Vermeulen observes, this is an example of '[o]ne of the novel's signature gestures [which] consist[s] in sudden shifts from the contemplation of a monument of civilization to the imagining of the violated life buried underneath.'[10] These 'sudden shifts' are motivated by moments of disturbed, anomalous vision: '[i]t wouldn't have drawn my attention at all, if I hadn't seen a curious shape – sculpture or architecture, I couldn't tell at first – set into the middle of it.'[11] The 'curious shape' 'turn[s] out to be' a monument marking the site as a burial ground for enslaved Africans, whose history is routinely buried by the uncritical and compromised narratives of the formation of the United States.

Like the texts studied in the first two chapters of this thesis, Julius possesses a deep awareness of orthodox histories as the purview of 'the victors' and an ethical attentiveness to marginalised narratives. But the author is also alert to the dangers of an oblique and melancholy approach to narratives in which, to borrow Benjamin's phrase, 'history merges into setting'.[12] In the previous chapters I have touched on Benjamin's early writings on allegory, which Benjamin sees dialectically as both politically unproductive (for it regards catastrophe as a natural inevitability) as well as capable of revealing 'hidden knowledge'. That is, allegory always exposes itself; it discloses the knowledge it hides. As Petra Halkes observes, allegory – both medieval and postmodern – 'provides sites for the continuing evaluation of representation.'[13] The textual death's head provided by Cole's epigraph signals this allegorical tension wrapped up in the 'modes of viewing and knowing' that recur throughout *Open City*.[14] The first half of the novel, I argue, is configured like a *trompe-l'oeil* made up of generic signifiers which mark the post-9/11 novel, the cosmopolitan novel, and the 'Sebaldian' novel. The second half of the novel, introduced by what will become the

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[8] Rolando Perez, *Severo Sarduy and the Neo-Baroque Image of Thought in the Visual Arts* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2012), p. 33.

[9] *OC,* p. 220.

[10] Pieter Vermeulen, 'Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism', *Journal of Modern Literature,* 37.1 (Fall 2013), pp. 40-57 (p. 47).

[11] Cole, p. 220.

[12] Benjamin, *OGTD*, p. 92.

[13] Petra Halkes, *Aspiring to the Landscape: On Painting and the Subject of Nature* (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 60.

[14] Ibid.

ironic epigraph, 'I have searched myself', disturbs the illusion of Julius as an ethical narrator. This disturbance is no less than a textual anamorph that demands a radical reorientation of perspective on behalf of the reader. Elizabeth Edwards provides the following description of an anamorph which, I want to suggest, speaks directly to the narrative field of *Open City*:

> [t]he anamorph […] 'hides' an image in an alternative perspective to the main one given by the painting, as in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, or that hides the image in a mess of distortion […] In the Holbein painting, the anamorph appears as a blob or rent in the lower part of the canvas. Once the anamorph is seen as a skull, the most remarkable thing about the painting is the way in which *one did not see it in the first place*, for some reason, one can gaze at this painting in the usual contemplative immersion and not ask oneself why there is a rending blob in the lower foreground.[15]

Each of Julius's historical insights is predicated on an anomalous form of vision that reproduces the anamorphic effect on the viewer/reader described above; the sites/sights of the city that Julius confronts are already present in the landscape, but they require a skewed, sometimes hallucinatory perspective to become fully legible; and this becoming-legible depends on the realisation that '*one did not see it in the first place*'. Readers of *Open City* find themselves in this precise predicament – where insight is the realisation of a form of hermeneutic blindness – when Julius is confronted by Moji Kasali, the sister of his childhood friend, whom he raped at a party when he was fourteen.[16] When Moji delivers her testimony, she asks Julius to 'say something', giving him an opportunity to provide witness to his own act of violence.[17] Instead, the narration switches abruptly to an anecdote about Nietzsche and Scaevola, a legendary Roman assassin – in short, Julius resumes his given mode of contemplative, detached narration which, up to his encounter with Moji, signified an ethical form of narrating and relating to the world. These revelations of hitherto-unseen histories,

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[15] Elizabeth Edwards, 'The Banal Profound and the Profoundly Banal: Andy Warhol', *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries*, ed. by Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 255-274 (pp. 267-268). Original emphases.

[16] Ibid.

[17] I use the term 'testimony' throughout this chapter in pointed contrast to 'accusation'. While the term 'accusation' may be a functional designation, its meaning is not neutral and its synonymousness with 'allegation' introduces an element of ambiguity that cannot and should not be maintained. Testimony, a declaration of lived experience, is more appropriate here. Nearly every critic who has discussed *Open City* uses the term 'accusation' to describe the moment in the novel when Moji tells Julius he raped her. See, for example, O'Gorman, p. 59, p. 60, and p. 64. See also Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature at the End of the Novel*, p. 101; Rachel Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 180; Anna Thiemann, *Rewriting the American Soul: Trauma, Neuroscience and the Contemporary Literary Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 168; Kristian Shaw, *Cosmopolitanism in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (Cham, CH.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 127.

which are prompted by moments of anamorphic vision – instances in which the almost-overlooked suddenly comes into focus – have a dual significance. First, they reinscribe narratives that have been erased and/or neglected, and as such they constitute an ethical representation of the histories that are attached to places and objects; at the same time, these anamorphic images testify to the dangers of overlooking marginalised stories. Consequently, they subtly instruct the reader to apply the anamorphic gaze to the novel itself, to images and encounters which the narrator overlooks.

Open City appears on the literary landscape at the intersection of post-9/11 discourse, cosmopolitan theory, and a renewed attention to the ethics of narration. The immediate critical responses to *Open City* framed the novel as, variously, a post-9/11 novel, a cosmopolitan novel, and as an homage to the novels of W.G. Sebald. In the following sections, I will provide an account of these responses and the political and literary contexts from which they emerge, starting with the post-9/11 novel, a genre of representational crisis which, I argue, turns toward cosmopolitan strategies to reconcile the binaries between the self and the 'other' and distortions that characterised post-9/11 discourse; the cosmopolitan novel appears to avoid the perceived inadequacies of much post-9/11 literature and rhetoric, but, as critics such as Madhu Krishnan and Pieter Vermeulen rightly assert, traditional cosmopolitanism contains serious blind spots that *Open City* both stages and critiques.[18] Finally, I note how Cole's novel is almost without exception deemed 'Sebaldian' by popular and academic critics alike, and explore how Cole both adapts and modifies Sebald's narrative strategies in ways that require us to rethink narrative ethics.

It should be noted each of these generically unstable 'genres' are interrelated in their attempts to secure ethical forms of representation and/of relation. As such, they are certainly not mutually exclusive: Sebald's work has been recognised by several critics as cosmopolitan, for example. This comparison also hinges on the highly significant figure of the *flâneur*, but is also related to forms of aesthetic or cultural cosmopolitanism that *Open City* reveals to be utterly unsustainable. In problematising the *flâneur*, Cole also discloses the limits of a 'Sebaldian' narrator and Sebald's oblique ethics of narration. *Open City* draws out the interrelatedness of the generically unstable 'genres' by foregrounding a common visual rhetoric of relation that is structured by disparities of perspective. As I hope to demonstrate, *Open City* is a literary response to each of these political-aesthetic debates, but

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[18] Madhu Krishnan, 'Postcoloniality, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism in the *Open City*', *Textual Practice*, 29.4 (2015), pp. 675-696 (p. 675).

the novel also anticipates and resists its own framing within the very discourses with which it became associated.

3.1 'A New 'Angle of Vision': The Perspectival Politics of 9/11

Benjamin's essay 'The Storyteller' (from which I take this chapter's epigraph) describes how the First World War caused a traumatic rupture in narration, bringing about the demise of the traditional figure of the storyteller. No traditional experience could be drawn upon to understand the unassimilable experience of destruction that the war had caused; the storyteller was left empty-handed. Although the essay is ostensibly about language, Benjamin articulates the loss of the storyteller through spatial and perspectival rhetoric from the beginning: the storyteller has 'become something remote from us and is moving ever further away.' For Benjamin, the trauma of World War I caused 'our image not only of the external world but also of the moral world [to undergo] changes overnight, changes which were previously thought impossible.'[19] This new world was one of impoverished experience where 'the wish to hear a story expressed' was met with 'embarrassment all around', a discomfited reticence about recounting the horrors of trench warfare – stories that did not correspond to the heroic tales associated with epic (Homeric) storytelling. After all, Benjamin rhetorically asks, '[w]asn't it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent – not richer – but poorer in communicable experience?'[20]

Far from communicating experience, Benjamin contends, 'what poured out in the flood of war books ten years later was anything but experience that can be shared orally.'[21] To narrate the experience of the war was to narrate the loss of experience, and this narration could only take place in the silence of the printed page. As Shoshana Felman superbly puts it, '[s]omething happened, Benjamin suggests, that has brought about the death – the agony – of the storyteller, both as a literary genre and as a discursive mode in daily life'.[22] The trauma of war thus inheres a dual loss: 'the art of storytelling […] [and] the ability to share experiences.'[23] The war not only changes how stories are told, but also brings about a new,

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[19] Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 143.
[20] Ibid., pp. 143-144.
[21] Ibid., p. 144.
[22] Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth-Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 26.
[23] 'The Storyteller', p. 144.

terrifying way of seeing the world, an 'angle of vision' predicated on disproportion and disparities of scale:

> For never 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. A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, *beneath those clouds,* in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, *the tiny, fragile human body.*[24]

Open City was written in 2011, ten years after 11 September 2001, but is set during 2006, five years after the attacks. It provides a related but very distinct view that considers the advancement and intensification of suicide terrorism, drone warfare, global flows of capital (and subsequently of labour), and punitive restrictions on freedom of movement – the factors that 'belie' experience today. Where Cole's novel takes up the thread of Benjamin's 'Storyteller' lies in its organisation around various forms of distance and perspective. The narrator, a resident psychiatrist, is characterised by a detached affect that dissociates him from his own impressions and encounters. Images of aerial views and long-distance perspectives recur throughout the novel, as do miniaturised images, such as a scale model of the pre-9/11 skyline or Julius's meditation on bedbugs. There is also the form of distance involved in looking away from memories of violence, of using psychic 'screens' to put distance between oneself and a traumatising event. Furthermore, there is the studied distance associated with the *flâneur*; on his walks, Julius interprets the city as a 'counterpoint' to his psychiatry work where he interprets dreams. In between these extremes of vision are anomalous, anamorphic perspectives where what is seen is not immediately apprehended until the narrator arrives at a sudden 'new angle' of vision where the images come into full resolution. But there is one particular passage in *Open City* that reinscribes Benjamin's image of the 'tiny, fragile human body' dwarfed by the sky; during one of his walks, Julius observes the 'brightly colored advertisements for various tourist sites in lower Manhattan' ('RELIVE THE DAY AMERICA'S TICKER STOPPED', reads an advertisement for the Museum of American Finance) before noting:

> But atrocity is nothing new, not to humans not to animals. The difference is that in our time it is uniquely well organized, carried out with pens, trains, ledgers, barbed

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[24] Ibid. My emphases.

wire, work camps, gas. And this late contribution, the absence of bodies. No bodies were visible, except falling ones, on the day American's ticker stopped. Marketable stories of all kinds had thickened around the injured coast of our city, but the depiction of the dead bodies was forbidden.[25]

The presiding image of the 'falling man' here corresponds to the 'tiny, fragile human body' in Benjamin's account of post-WWI experience. Images of World Trade Center workers jumping from the buildings in an attempt to escape the flames were so upsetting that they were pulled from media circulation: 'they don't want to be reminded that someone might have jumped'.[26] In the post-9/11 imaginary, this traumatic image of creaturely vulnerability is not a body on the ground, but a body that falls through the sky 'in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions'. In terms that echo Benjamin's depiction of the remote body as 'moving ever further away', Jennifer Good writes of Richard Drew's notorious 'Falling Man' image, '[i]f DaVinci's drawing shows the Vitruvian ideal – the human body inscribed and centred as the organizing principle of the built environment – Drew's picture […] shows the body and building as incompatible. If the photographer had zoomed out far enough to picture the tower in its entirety, the falling figure would be all but invisible.'[27] Susan Lurie makes a similar observation, noting that images of falling bodies 'emphasize[d] the fatal height of the towers and show the trapped people as tiny figurines leaning and climbing out of windows.'[28] Good continues: 'And so, he has had to reduce the building to an abstracted series of Op-Art style geometric forms that assault and confuse the eye. Vitruvian man is grounded, centred […] the 'jumper' […] has an equally striking but completely different relationship to the geometry of space. His space has been, to say the least, "rendered strange."'[29] If the strange, 'incompatible' relation between the human figure and the building (or indeed the sky) proposed questions about *looking* – where (not) to look, how we look, and how we should be looking – the skewed angles of these images also corresponded to distorted forms of relation as such. This visual reorientation emerges

[25] *OC*, p. 58.

[26] Kevin Flynn and Jim Dwyer, 'Falling Bodies, a 9/11 Image Etched in Pain', *The New York Times*, 10 September 2004 <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/10/nyregion/nyregionspecial2/falling-bodies-a-911-image-etched-in-pain.html?mcubz=3> [accessed 5 May 2015].

[27] Jennifer Good, *Photography and September 11th: Spectacle, Memory, Trauma,* 2nd edition (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 76.

[28] Susan Lurie, 'Falling Persons and National Embodiment: The Reconstruction of Safe Spectatorship in the Photograph Record of 9/11', *Terror, Culture, Politics: Rethinking 9/11*, ed. by Daniel J. Sherman and Terry Nardin (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp.44-68 (p. 54).

[29] Good, ibid.

alongside a precarious set of political, economic, embodied and ethical relations. It is clear that the central issue faced by authors writing after 9/11 was how to think, and represent, relationality at a time when orientations toward the state, globalisation, media (including literature) and 'the other' were in flux.[30]

3.2 Deutsche Bank

Not only did a shift in perspective occur after 9/11, but a bifurcation of perspective occurred two opposing directions. On the one hand, Daniel O'Gorman and Ruth Franklin both describe the post-9/11 novel as defined by an 'inward gaze'. As O'Gorman rightly observes, *Open City* 'uses tropes of solitude and memory' to 'frame' 'post-9/11 reality […] in a deeply "inward-gazing" way.'[31] At the same time, however, the novel allows 'the intricate connections between the United States and the rest of the globe […] to filter both in and out of its narrative to such a *disorienting* extent that the narrator loses sight of his own place in the history of the world.'[32] In this sense, Cole's novel represents what Arin Keeble describes as 'the real crisis in representation' post-9/11, that is, 'the fundamental conflictedness of the texts […] [between] notions of epoch, trauma and the personal against history, context, politics and continuity.'[33]

Through the palimpsestic structure of *Open City*, Cole layers these two approaches and mobilises then through the narrator's gaze. As Katharina Donn observes, after 9/11, '[t]he relation between image and reality, representation and experience, is […] fundamentally redefined'.[34] When vision is disoriented, the reliability of the image's mimetic ability to represent reality is called into question, as is the efficacy of perception. The image in the 'Storyteller' and Cole's 'falling bodies' are not, strictly speaking, anamorphic images, but, like anamorphs, they 'thematize the incapacity of a representation

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[30] Arin Keeble, *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2014), p. 192.
[31] Daniel O'Gorman, 'Gazing Inward in Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* and Teju Cole's *Open City*', *Fictions of the War on Terror: Difference and the Transnational 9/11 Novel* (London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 40-75; Ruth Franklin, 'The Stubborn, Inward Gaze of the Post-9/11 Novel', *The New Republic* (15 September 2011), <http://newrepublic.com/article/94180/september-11-the-novel-turns-inward> [accessed 21 February 2016].
[32] Ibid.
[33] Arin Keeble, *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2014), p. 45.
[34] Katharina Donn, *A Poetics of Trauma After 9/11: Representing Trauma in a Digitized Present* (New York; London: Routledge, 2017), p. 122.

to be a substitute of that which is forever lost.'[35] In what follows, I will trace examples of Julius's 'anamorphic gaze' and its spatial reordering of the city as he retraces the sites of 9/11. The sites not only reveal their own repressed histories, but act as substitutes for Julius's own memory. Julius's narration of the site shows it to be a 'palimpsest' of 'written, erased, rewritten' narratives inscribed in the landscape, but which also retroactively stand in for, or screen, Julius's own implication in the violence in and of history. I want to return to Julius's impression of Wall Street Station [Fig. 7], with which this chapter began. Julius first notices the great contrast of the station's 'grandeur' from the other 'perfunctory […] tiled tunnels and narrow exits' of other stations in Lower Manhattan. First, the station appears as a nineteenth-century arcade [see Figure 5]:

> The hall had two rows of columns running along its length, and there were sets of glass doors on either end. The glass, the dominance of white […] made me the room feel like an atrium or greenhouse […] but the tripartite division of the space, with the center aisle broader than the two to either side of it, was more reminiscent of a cathedral. The vaults strengthened this impression, and what came to mind was the florid Gothic style of England, as exemplified in buildings like Bath Abbey or the cathedral in Winchester [Fig. 6] in which their colonnades spray up into the vaults. Not that the station replicated the stone tracery of such churches. It evoked the effect, rather, by means of its finely chequered or woven surface, a gigantic assemblage of white plastic.[36]

This is not merely an ekphrasis on postmodern corporate architecture; it shows Julius in the mode of the *flâneur*, experiencing the city as an assemblage of esoteric signifiers; these signifiers are arranged in such a way to trick his perception. The building's shroud doubles as a mask, recalling Rem Koolhaas's description of Manhattan's skyline: 'Only in New York has architecture become the design of costumes that do not reveal the true nature of repetitive interiors, but slip smoothly into the subconscious to perform their roles as symbols.'[37] The Deutsche Bank building, already monumental, becomes, to Julius's eyes, obelisk-like. Not only does this cast the building as a lost object, but an object from a civilisation 'lost' to outsiders. Furthermore, obelisks are often presented as pure symbols of imperial power, but at the same time inscrutable and enigmatic, bearing an indecipherable history. Although the

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[35] Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 136.
[36] *OC*, pp. 46-47.
[37] Rem Koolhas qtd. in Patricia A. Morton, '"Document of Civilization and Barbarism": The Wold Trade Center Near and Far', *Terror, Culture, Politics: Rethinking 9/11,* eds. Terry Nardin and Daniel J. Sherman (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 15-32 (p. 23).

text doesn't reveal it, the station Julius describes is actually a station entrance that connects Wall Street Station with Deutsche Bank. An 'assemblage' of different period styles – from Classical and Gothic to fin-de-siècle, the lobby is constructed from artificial materials which 'evoke the effect' of such buildings.
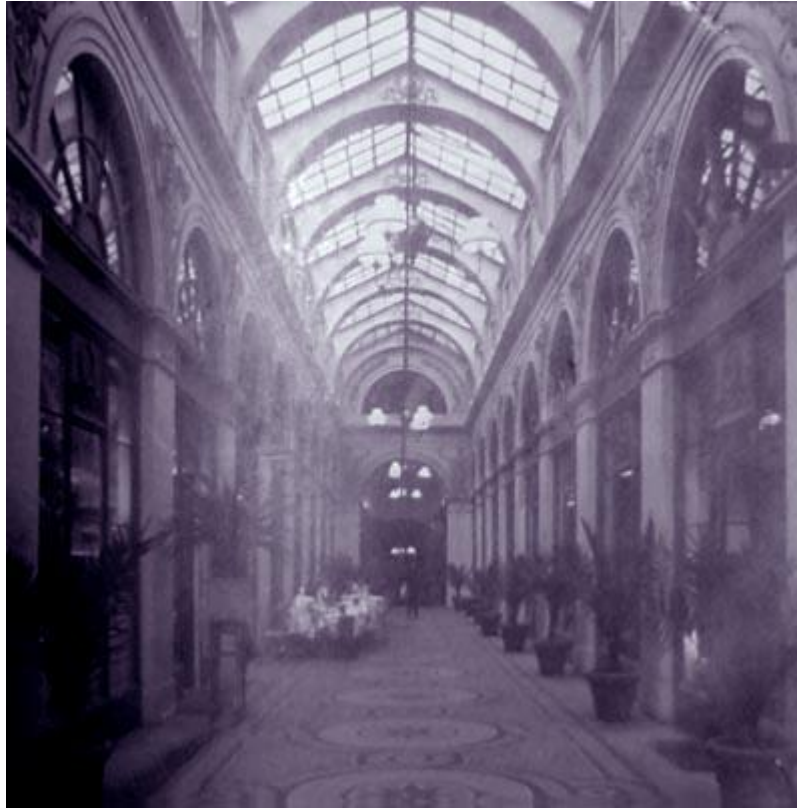

Figure 5. Paris Arcades, cover photo, *The Arcades Project*

Only from a distance can the columns and vaults replicate a natural surface, while its 'grandeur' is due to its 'gigantic' scale alone. The atrium is an example of the somewhat contradictorily phrased 'privatised public buildings', open to the public only on certain days. Spaces such as these complicate the perambulations of the *flâneur,* but they are also curiosities to those who know how to look. While details of the lobby and its attachment to Deutsche Bank aren't included in the text, Julius describes it as a strangely dehumanised space:

> My original impression of the grandeur of the space, though not of its size, quickly changed as I walked through the hall. The columns could have been wrought from recycled plastic chairs, and the ceiling seemed to have been carefully constructed out of white Lego blocks. This feeling of being in a large-scale model was only increased

by the lonely palm trees in their pots […] a pair of men […] [who] did nothing to correct my impression of being among life-size mannequins.[38]

Figure 6. Winchester Cathedral, ca. 1865-1895[39]

The large scale of the lobby and the scarcity of human beings populating it makes them seem, to Julius, like mere props in an architectural rendering. However, this synthetic, postmodern interior gives way to strange, anachronistic details: for example, a stranger's coat is described as 'oversize, mouse-coloured' that falls 'like a Victorian dress around him'.[40] Through such details, Cole builds up a picture of distorted space containing multiple temporalities whose fleeting legibility is contingent on the viewer's given perspective. Once he emerges from Wall Street Station, Julius enters a 'small alley' wherein 'it was as though

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[38] *OC*, p. 47.

[39] Unknown artist, Winchester Cathedral, ca.1865- ca. 1895, albumen print, Andrew Dickson White Architectural Photographs Collection, Cornell University <https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:3873794> [accessed 15 February 2015].

[40] Ibid.

the entire world had fallen away. I was strangely comforted to find myself alone in this way in the heart of the city.'[41] The alleyway (which Julius notes is 'no one's preferred route to any destination') is an unconventional route set off from the widened streets which regulate traffic and pedestrian flows; it is also a partially enclosed space, ensconcing Julius in a cloak of privacy.[42]

Figure 7. 60 Wall Street Lobby, photograph by Ray Weitzenberg 2010.[43]

The alley is also a passageway (like the nineteenth-century Parisian *passages* or arcades Benjamin discusses throughout his late work) through and between multiple discrete spaces, a zone of connection and detachment. Looking through the frame of the alley, Julius sees 'a great black building [ahead]' [Fig. 8]: 'Ahead of me was a great black building. The surface of its half-visible tower was matte, a light-absorbing black like that of cloth, and its sharp geometry made it look like a freestanding shadow or cardboard cutout.'[44] Throughout the text, and particularly in this chapter, Julius includes each street and landmark he sees in his narrative walk through New York. Yet he does not name the black, cloth-covered building, which is the ruined tower once occupied by Deutsche Bank. The building was not a direct

[41] *OC*, p. 52.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ray Weitzenberg, photograph, *Architizer*, <https://architizer.com/projects/jp-morgan-headquarters/> [accessed 20 February 2015].
[44] Ibid.

target of the 9/11 attacks but was seriously damaged when it was hit by debris from the South Tower.

Figure 8. Deutsche Bank, photograph by Elisabeth Robert, 2001[45]

When he exits the alley, and comes to Albany Street, he is able 'to see the tower more clearly, although still at some distance': '[i]t was completely veiled in a densely woven black net. Where that narrow, quiet street met Washington, I saw to my right, about a block north of where I stood, a great empty space. I immediately thought of the obvious but, equally quickly, put the idea out of my mind.'[46] The netting is both a burial shroud and a veil that conceals the extent of the damage. It also has a practical purpose that designates the building as a toxic object in the fullest sense: it held in asbestos, silica, and lead, among other toxic substances, 'containing' the traces of destruction (bone fragments were later found in the air

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[45] Elisabeth Roberts, photograph, *Downtown Express*, 18.28 (2005)
<http://www.downtownexpress.com/de_133/fallingdeutscheglass.html> [accessed 5 March 2016].
[46] *OC*, p. 52. Emphasis mine.

ducts) that threatened to spill out.[47] Julius describes the tower as a negative object: an unnamed void that absorbs all light. In contrast to the reflective surfaces of extant skyscrapers, the black netting is deflective, and can be seen to stand in for the 'screen memories' that, as Lucy Bond argues, emerged from the hermeneutic quagmire of political and literary discourse after 9/11.[48] Indeed, it actively repels memory: when Julius sees the building, he 'immediately [thinks] of *the obvious*' (a distancing euphemism) before 'put[ting] the idea out of [his] mind'.[49] As Krishnan further highlights:

> [T]hinking of "the obvious" would require that Julius confront the enormity of the violence marking the site, both in the events of 9/11 and in the site's position within a global system of iniquity, fuelled by international division of labour […] [i]n an effort to supress its material history, Julius instead focuses upon the site as "empty", removed from the violence of the regulatory space in which it played a central part.[50]

However, as Julius continues to walk, he reaches Ground Zero: 'the empty space was […] I now saw and admitted, the obvious: the ruins of the World Trade Center.'[51] From this site, Julius encounters the Deutsche Bank building from a farther vantage point: '[b]eyond the site [of the World Trade Center] was the building I had seen earlier in the evening.' Julius describes the building as 'mysterious and severe as an obelisk.'[52] Instead of an object that short-circuits memory (Julius never identifies the building), the Deutsche Bank site becomes highly significant, if enigmatically so. This connects to Bond's theory that post-9/11 analogical memory actually precludes recognition. Julius adjusts his first viewing of the Deutsche Bank building as 'freestanding shadow' without a source and an unreflective place of forgetting without a source to that of an ancient monument engraved with a script he cannot decipher.[53] By comparing the site to an obelisk, the narrator draws an analogy between 9/11 and the decline of an entire ancient civilisation; a hyperbole which displaces the present into the past. Unlike Susan Howe's open, lace-like texts, which allow a virtual

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[47] Jay D. Aronson provides a history of the Deutsche Bank building's excavation and contested demolition in *Who Owns the Dead? The Science and Politics of Death at Ground Zero* (Cambridge, Mass.; Oxford: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 202-210 (p. 202).
[48] Lucy Bond, 'Types of Transculturality: Narrative Frameworks and the Commemoration of 9/11', *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders*, ed. by Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), pp. 61-82 (p. 77).
[49] *OC*, p. 52.
[50] Krishnan, p. 683.
[51] *OC*, p. 52.
[52] Ibid., p. 58.
[53] Ibid., p. 220.

conversation between memories, the 'text' of the Deutsche Bank building is 'densely woven' and actively eludes the observer's perception. As Julius's visual analogy attests, the 'great black building' attracts analogical meaning, but, as with light, the black netting absorbs this meaning into the weft of forgetting and disavowal. This is indicative of a wider cultural act of displacement that Julius himself observes: '[t]he place [the site of the World Trade Center] had become a metonym of its disaster: I remembered a tourist who once asked me how he could get to 9/11; not the site of the events of 9/11 but to 9/11 itself, the date petrified into broken stones.'[54] Ariela Freedman reads this anecdote as a 'strategic' 'evasiveness' that 'resist[s] turning the event into a fetish' because, 'instead of seeing the sublime in the site', the narrator abruptly directs his gaze toward 'the mundane, marking the restaurant on the corner [and] the lonely men dining behind large glass windows like a Hopper painting'.[55] Yet this shift in attention is surely a further act of evasiveness. In reading the site as identical to its disaster, the tourist performs an act of displacement that imitates Julius's earlier circumlocution of 9/11 as 'the obvious'. Through this metonym, the tourist anchors the actuality of 9/11 in a concrete space that is traversable. By identifying the site as 9/11 itself, the event becomes an object that can be managed, observed, contained, and, importantly, viewed from a distance, as Julius does. Time is domesticated through space: as Benjamin says, history merges into setting, 'petrified into broken stones'.[56] Julius views the site from various points of distance, first through the alleyway and then from the site of the Twin Towers, observing the ruins of the Deutsche Bank building from afar, like the romantic New Zealander of Gustave Doré's engraving. The novel pivots around this melancholy, observational distance, drawing out its potential for insight while forcefully underscoring the fatal limits of such a perspective.

The 'obelisk-like' Deutsche Bank building signifies the monolithic narrative by which 9/11 was rendered a singularity, an interruption that split history and temporality into pre- and post-9/11, where every image and ruined building became an inscrutable but highly significant symbol: the post-9/11 landscape is an allegorical one that 'speak[s] of something other than it represents.'[57] The allegory of the black netting is no less than an allegory of

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[54] Ibid, p. 52.
[55] Ariela Freedman, 'How to Get to 9/11: Teju Cole's Melancholic Fiction', *Representing 9/11: Trauma, Ideology, and Nationalism in Literature, Film, and Television*, ed. by Paul Petrovic (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), pp. 177-186 (p. 182).
[56] *OGTD*, p. 93.
[57] Grootenboer, p. 136.

allegorical operation: the act of concealment. As the narrator's walk concludes, he observes the commercialisation of memory that the site of the World Trade Center represents, a site that is also a metonym for global capital, has come to represent: 'marketable stories of all kinds had thickened around the injured coast of our city'.[58] Like the black netting, the marketisation of Ground Zero represents (and misappropriates) catastrophe. To identify the site solely with 9/11 is to erase other (often intertwined) histories that lie beneath its foundations, as Julius remarks at the conclusion of the chapter's walk:

> This was not the first erasure on the site. Before the towers had gone up, there had been a bustling network of little streets traversing this part of town. Robinson Street, Laurens Street, College Place: all of them had been obliterated in the 1960s to make way for the World Trade Center buildings, and all were forgotten now. […] And, before that? What Lenape paths lay buried beneath the rubble? The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten. There had been communities before Columbus ever set sail, before Verrazano anchored his ships in the narrows, or the black Portuguese slave trader Esteban Gómez sailed up the Hudson; human beings had lived here, built homes, and quarrelled with their neighbors long before the Dutch ever saw a business opportunity. […] Generations rushed through the eye of the needle, and I, one of the still legible crowd, entered the subway. I wanted to find the line that connected me to my own part of these stories.[59]

This passage, which is crucial to the novel's philosophy of history, requires some unpacking. First, as the narrator makes clear, the site where the World Trade Center once stood does not exclusively 'belong' to '9/11', but, as Krishnan aptly contends, is 'written over by the power of international finance' alongside displaced indigenous communities, the slave trade, and the Dutch East India company, one of earliest transnational corporations.[60] It is clear, as Freedman writes, Cole does not wish 'to use 9/11 […] as a metonym for a unique, exclusive, or singular event but as a way to expose earlier traumas'.[61] Secondly, the narrator's meditation on the palimpsestic nature of history and place prompts Julius to seek 'the line that connected me to my own part of these stories' which indicates a commitment to reading the 'still legible' traces of erased histories. The unmistakably Benjaminian image of

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[58] *OC*, p. 58.
[59] *OC*, p. 59.
[60] Krishnan, p. 657.
[61] Freedman, p. 182.

'generations rush[ing] through the eye of the needle' like commuters hurrying through the subway entrance emphasises the past as something that 'flits by' and threatens to 'disappear irretrievably'.[62] Though the traces are 'still legible', marking their survival in the text of the city, they, too, threaten to 'disappear irretrievably' in the onslaught of erasure and reinscription. The 'eye of the needle' has a dialectical structure, as the point through which histories disappear, and as the messianic entrance through which history may be redeemed. In order for the latter to occur, the historian-as-reader must not only seize an image of the *past* but 'recognise the *present* as intended in that image'.[63] Krishnan notes how Julius's historical meditation on Ground Zero 'div[es] into a temporal sequence attuned to the unmasking of an alleged truth for the site' that simultaneously constructs an 'illusion of multiplicity' and 'dissociate[s] its violence and its metonymic implication in […] an eradication of difference' through 'an enforced teleological ordering'.[64] Julius is turned so far to the past that he reaches the very limit of history through the regressive repetition of 'before'. He does not recognise himself as 'intended' in the images of erasure and revisionism that appear to him on his walks. On the level of narrative, Julius's seizure of the past itself constitutes a 'moment of danger'.[65]

Julius's reading of the Deutsche Bank building and of Ground Zero itself as sites of forgetting, which conceal memory – even as they nominally inscribe it – initially endow him with an ethical gaze determined from the standpoint of a cautious distance that is both hesitant (to avoid being caught up in the spectacle) and respectful. However, it is important to focus not only on the method through which Julius arrives at these insights, but the content of the insights themselves, which tells a story of disavowal and displacement, of 'covering up' inconvenient memories. Every major insight Julius reads into the landscape has a dual significance that both propels and implicates his narrative in the very erasures it is intent on uncovering. In Julius's reading of the Deutsche Bank building, the curious black netting that seems to deflect memory is a visual and psychological production of forgetting; a sort of negative *trompe-l'oeil* – an illusion of the absence rather than the presence of space. In the wider context of the novel, however, this postmodern obelisk is an allegory of Julius's own work of forgetting (which constitutes the narrative). To uncover suppressed histories and suppressed voices is to acknowledge the violence that threatens to destroy them. Encoded in

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[62] 'On the Concept', p. 390.
[63] Ibid. My emphases.
[64] Krishnan, p. 683.
[65] 'On the Concept', p. 390.

the narrator's recuperation of histories is an urgent demand to look for omissions, gaps and wounds in any given narrative, but most essentially in *Open City*.

3.3 Displacement: Lagos and New York

The black netting that enshrouded the Deutsche Bank building reflects a more general impulse in post-9/11 discourse to 'screen' elements of U.S. history that could not be assimilated into monolithic narratives in which the country was a martyr for freedom and democracy. According to John N. Duvall and Robert P. Marzec, these discourses were characterised by a 'failure to imagine the terrorist attacks as a part of a history of unequal relations and unequal distribution of power and wealth, unequal access to global resources, and unequal representations'.[66] Instead of critically examining the 'history of unequal relations', however, attempts to contextualise 9/11 often positioned the events in (uncritical) relation to other traumas from the past. As Bond writes, 'not all manifestations of comparative memory are as transcultural, multidirectional, or cosmopolitan as they first appear', citing Gary Suson's Ground Zero Museum Workshop (GZMW), which modelled itself on the Anne Frank Museum, drawing a spurious analogy between 9/11 and the Holocaust.[67] Such incommensurable comparisons are perhaps generated from the search for 'route[s] to making sense of what happened': unable to secure a meaning for what happened, a frantic and uncritical search for meaning in other histories might anchor the event in a familiar historical framework, even if that framework is an deeply devastating one. Bond writes: 'the apparent inability to situate 9/11 within any readily available interpretive framework' results in an 'analogical impulse' to '[substitute] a pre-digested past for the unexplained present.'[68] Although, as Bond acknowledges through her reading of A. Dirk Moses, this 'analogical' impulse is a feature of traumatic memory, she contends that drawing an analogy between 9/11 and events like the Holocaust 'often operate as a screen memory that can be mobilised to preclude recognition of America's historical shortcomings.'[69] In an account of the intersection of traumatic discourses in post-9/11 fiction and its reception by literary critics, Richard Crownshaw writes that '9/11 trauma could be more productively defined as the puncturing of the national fantasies of an inviolable and innocent homeland,

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[66] John N. Duvall and Robert P. Marzec (eds), 'Introduction: Fantasies of 9/11', *Narrating 9/11: Fantasies of State, Security, and Terrorism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), pp. 1-13 (p. 2).
[67] Lucy Bond, p. 77.
[68] Ibid., p. 70.
[69] Ibid., p. 89.

fantasies which themselves rest on the (failed) repression of foundational violence in the colonial settler creation of that homeland, and on subsequent notions of American exceptionalism at home and, in the exercise of foreign policy, abroad'.[70] Taken together, Bond and Crownshaw suggest that in order to 'work through' its own trauma, America would have to examine its implication in other traumatic histories. The protagonist's narrative reproduces the oscillation between disavowal and the desire to honour the ethical claim the past holds on the present by recognising the memory of the oppressed in historical narratives. This ethical imperative would involve a form a self-reflexive (dialectical) introspection that should entail the consideration of one's own relation to these narratives.

While Daniel O'Gorman has commented on the use of screen memory in *Open City*, he has so far only focused on one example at the end of the novel, where Moji confronts Julius about the rape. At a dinner party, on the terrace of a high-rise apartment, Moji delivers her traumatic testimony to Julius, who gives no indication of a response. Instead, the narrative suddenly shifts from the action as Julius remembers an anecdote from Albert Camus's journals, which Julius calls a 'double story':

> Scaevola had been captured while trying to kill the Etruscan king Porsenna and, rather than give away his accomplices, he showed his fearlessness by putting his right hand in a fire and letting it burn. […] Nietzsche, according to Camus, became angry when his schoolmates would not believe the Scaevola story. And so, the fifteen-year-old Nietzsche plucked a hot coal from the grate, and held it. Of course, it burned him. He carried the resulting scar with him for the rest of his life.[71]

As Vermeulen writes, this response is 'startling in its inadequacy' and is indicative of Julius's 'failure to engage with trauma' throughout the novel.[72] Vermeulen suggests that the 'double story' of Scaevola and Nietzsche stands in place of Julius's response and reaction to Moji, which 'converts the spectacle of traumatic suffering into an assertion of the heroism of inexpressiveness.'[73] This is partially correct, but I would add that Julius *does* engage with trauma (he is, after all, a psychiatrist), but only on a macro, world-historical level. Julius fails when he is called upon to engage with the specific trauma of an individual, an act that would require him to relate to other people, to the 'other' of his aesthetic milieu. Vermeulen

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[70] Richard Crownshaw, 'Deterritorializing the "Homeland" in American Studies and American Fiction after 9/11', *Journal of American Studies,* 45.4 (2011), pp. 757-776 (p. 757).
[71] *OC,* p. 145.
[72] Vermeulen, p. 101.
[73] Ibid., p. 53.

further asserts that this anecdote 'implicitly declares [Moji] guilty of a failure to feel the appropriate 'contempt for pain'; this may be true, but it also suggests Julius finds the trauma he inflicted on Moji as difficult to recognise as grasping a hot coal. The detail that stands out most from the anecdote is not Scaevola's 'contempt for pain' (the first part of the 'double story'), but the child Nietzsche's anger at being *disbelieved*, an encounter that scars him (whatever the anecdote's significance, it is incommensurable with the trauma of rape, an experience that cannot be given any just representation through the oblique, referential aesthetics performed by the novel, no less the perpetrator/protagonist through which this aesthetics is focalised). It also raises serious questions about the ethics of rape as a fictional device. This is not to say that literary representations of rape are unethical, but that, following Anne Reef, 'writing about rape […] is […] an ethically complex action.'[74] Even if Julius does not respond, I do not believe there is an implication of Moji's 'guilt'; in fact, it seems to further indict Julius, his version of events, his memory and, as Vermeulen further notes, reveals Julius's inadequate response to traumatic testimony. If it is a double story, it also redoubles Moji's anger – and agency: Julius, she says, 'had been ever-present in her life, like a stain or a scar.'[75] It soon becomes clear that Julius's technique of evasion really refers to the mark or wound of Moji's unacknowledged (by Julius, at any rate) trauma.

O'Gorman reads the Scaevola/Nietzsche anecdote as 'the very definition of a "screen memory", providing a comforting cover to the trauma of the event in question'; this screen memory, O'Gorman adds, is 'multidirectional' in the sense of the term used by Michael Rothberg to designate a model of comparative memory that is 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive, not privative.'[76] O'Gorman interprets Julius's lack of response and his anecdotal screen memory as a tacit acknowledgment of his guilt ('if he is guilty', O'Gorman somewhat flippantly qualifies): Julius's 'very *in*ability to think multidirectional is itself rendered multidirectional.'[77] However, I do not believe this screen memory is as multidirectional as O'Gorman suggests, since, as Rothberg himself writes, 'multidirectional memory functions at a level of the

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[74] Anne Reef, 'Representations of Rape in Apartheid and Post-Apartheid South African Literature', *Textual Ethos Studies, or Locating Ethics,* ed. by Anna Fahraeus and AnnKatrin Jonsson (Amsterdam; New York: Editions Rodopi, 2005), pp. 245-262 (p. 245). The politico-ethical ramifications of representing rape are also explored in *Rape and Representation,* ed. by Lynn A. Higgins (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
[75] *OC*, p. 44.
[76] O'Gorman, p. 74; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 3.
[77] Ibid., original emphasis.

collective as a screen memory does at the level of the individual'.[78] Though multidirectional memories abound in *Open City*, Julius's anecdotal screen memory is firmly an individual one that conceals his repressed memory of violence, not a dialogue between collective histories. Ethically speaking, Moji's memory should not be up for 'negotiation'. While the Scaevola/Nietzsche anecdote constitutes a screen memory, it does so in line with Freud's original account in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. While this particular screen memory (which provides a decisive break with the novel's surface narrative) displaces Moji's confrontation of Julius in New York, there is a series of screen memories in the preceding chapter that connect Julius's early life in Lagos to details of Moji's memory, constituting a further displacement of Julius's own repressed memory of the rape.

The chapter begins, 'I needed clothes for the ceremonies of my father's burial in May 1989'.[79] The date is significant because, as Moji will relate in the next chapter, the rape occurred 'in late 1989 […] when she was fifteen and [Julius] was a year younger.'[80] Julius continues to describe his trip to the tailor's shop to be fitted for a suit (for the burial) and a *buba* and *sokoto*, traditional Nigerian clothes (for the wake). The details of the funeral are perfunctory, and Julius's main impression is of 'unfunereal' weather, which he contrasts with Gustav Mahler's funeral – during which, he notes, 'it rained all the way through […] until […] the body was interred and the sun came out.'[81] One paragraph later, Cole writes, '[…] as soon as my father was interred that afternoon, I thought of someone else who had died, or had probably died'.[82] Julius describes how his driver (Julius's grandfather was involved in politics, his family is affluent) collided with a young student. The narrator's cohort drove the girl to the hospital, where Julius entreats the nurses to 'please save *me*', one of many details that acquire greater weight after Moji's testimony.[83] Julius admits that he protected the driver and 'didn't talk about her' to anyone about the incident. After years of forgetting, the girl '[comes] back to mind only four or five years later', at his father's funeral: 'by then it was as though the little girl […] dead on a cool morning, a funereal morning, was something I had dreamed about, or heard in a telling by someone else.' Julius never discovers

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[78] Rothberg, p. 14.
[79] Only the date indicates that this sentence occurred in Julius's past. *Open City* is mostly composed in the past indefinite tense, recalling the words of one of his patients, identified only as 'V': '[…] it's not in the past, it is still with us today; at least, it's still with me', p. 26.
[80] *OC*, p. 245.
[81] Ibid., p. 224.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., p. 225, my emphasis.

whether the girl survived or died, and his obstinate silence transforms the real memory into dream-content. When he describes his father's burial, Julius makes an unusual statement: 'I was already fourteen, not all that young, when my father was buried', noting that 'the memory of the day wasn't secure'.[84]

Through this strange disclosure, Julius further locates his memory in an exact time and place before equivocating that very memory. Julius's description of himself at fourteen as 'not all that young' indicates the sober maturity of a teenager faced with life-altering loss; it is also subtly endows him with the capacity to be morally culpable for his actions. The narrative then shifts to a memory of the memory of the funeral: '[…] on May 9 of this year, I was on the I train on the way to work when it came to mind that he had been committed to earth for exactly eighteen years.'[85] 'In that time', Julius explains, 'I had complicated the memory of the day, not with other burials, of which I had attended only a few, but with depictions of burials.[86] He cites El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (1586) and Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (1850), adding that 'the actual event had taken on the characteristics of those images, and in doing so had become faint and unreliable. I couldn't be sure of the color of the earth, whether it really was the intense red clay I thought I remembered, or whether I had taken the form of the priest's surplice from El Greco's painting or from Courbet's.'[87] The metonymic displacement of Julius's personal memory to an aesthetic one – artistic representations of burials – can be situated within the traditional framework of screen memory as Freud conceives it, but with certain qualifications. Freud's conception of the screen memory falls into three categories: a 'retroactive or retrogressive' screen memory, a screen memory that is 'pushed ahead or displaced forward', and 'contemporary or contiguous screen memories'.[88] In the first instance, a later memory screens an earlier one; in the type of memory that is 'displaced forward', or progressive screen memory (as John Fletcher neatly terms it), an early memory is screened off by a later one; finally, the third type of screen memory is the 'contemporary or contiguous' screening, where the memory of one event is concealed by another, contemporaneous memory.[89]

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[84] Ibid., p. 227.
[85] Ibid., p. 228.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Sigmund Freud, 'Childhood Memories and Screen Memories', *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, 2nd edn., 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), III, pp. 43-52 (p. 44).
[89] John Fletcher, *Freud and the Scene of Trauma* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 117.

All three types of screen memory are at work in Julius's recollection of his father's burial. Julius's memory of taking the 1 train on the anniversary of his father's burial retrogressively displaces the original memory. Second, the memory of burial itself screens the earlier memory of his father's death: 'it was the date of the burial, not that of the death that I marked as an anniversary.'[90] This is an instance of progressive screen memory. A further instance of progressive memory can be found in the displacement of father's burial to artistic 'depictions of burials'. But the memories that screen the narrator's memory of his father's burial aren't memories grounded in any particular experience; the painted burials by El Greco and Courbet in his mind's eye aren't derived from a specific experience (these images are not memories of to a visit to a museum, or a print in a book he once read, for example). Finally, taken as a whole, the memory of the burial, which is characterised as both '[in]secure' and 'complicated', acts as a (near-)contemporaneous screen memory of the rape: the funeral occurs in 1989, the year in which Julius was fourteen and raped Moji. However, like every screen memory, this crucial contemporaneous screen memory is apprehended belatedly.

I want to briefly return to the Scaevola/Nietzsche anecdote that O'Gorman introduces as a screen memory. This scene definitively situates Julius as a dissociated observer rather than a witness. The 'line that connect[s]' Julius to his 'own part in [the] stories' violence and historical erasure and revision – the destructive element that hangs over every palimpsest – is directly articulated by Moji, the victim and the survivor of his violence, but he refuses to recognise it and, through his narrative circumlocution, attempts to make this line illegible. Julius's encounter with Moji is the 'moment of danger' in which an image of the past intrudes on the 'secure version' Julius 'had been constructing since 1992', when he arrived in New York.[91] This moment clarifies the dialectical, meta-hermeneutic structure of Cole's novel whereby the narrator's failure to comprehend history within the interpretive framework of his own narration requires the reader to apply these ethical ideals to the text itself.

3.4. Cosmopolitan Flight

In *9/11 Fiction, Empathy, and Otherness*, Tim Gauthier notes that the literary response to the '"us" and "them" narratives [that] proliferated after 9/11' resulted in a 'renewed

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[90] *OC*, p. 228.
[91] *OC*, p. 156.

emphasis on cosmopolitan values [...] to counterbalance an apparent movement towards increased polarization, encapsulated in the oft-mentioned "clash of civilizations"'.[92] Like the post-9/11 novel, the cosmopolitan novel demands a radical adjustment to our imaginative 'angle of vision'. In his book-length study of the cosmopolitan novel, Berthold Schoene recalls Timothy Brennan's pivotal essay 'The National Longing for Form' (1989), in which Brennan asserts that the novel form 'accompanied the rise of nations [...] by mimicking the structure of the nation.'[93] Brennan's thesis prompts Schoene to ask 'whether, in our increasingly globalised world, the novel may already have begun to adapt and renew itself by imagining the world instead of the nation [...] and what might be the impact of these characteristics' on the novel form.[94] If, as the critics discussed so far suggest, the post-9/11 novel often reproduces American exceptionalism – and if, following Brennan, the traditional novel form simulates the structure of the nation-state – then the cosmopolitan novel appears to provide a suitable alternative through its emphasis on multiple (inter)connections across and beyond nation-states. Read along these lines, *Open City* offers an example of the cosmopolitan turn in post-9/11 fiction, one that turns away from the domestic, 'inward-gaze', toward a more open, globally-oriented perspective.

Since its publication, *Open City* has been acclaimed as one such cosmopolitan novel, and it is unsurprising that scholarly discussions of *Open City* (including my own) tend to focus on the ways Cole engages with and interrogates cosmopolitan discourse. Giles Foden contends that narrative 'action is the wrong spoor by which to pursue this book', citing the novel's 'cosmopolitan range of reference' as its clearest route.[95] This 'cosmopolitan range' can be detected not only by the diverse high-cultural markers that swirl around Julius – Mendelssohn, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Velazquez and Roland Barthes are all woven into the his thoughts and conversation – or the narrator's traversal of three countries, but also in the novel's highly mobile, perambulatory mode of narration that is structured by the narrator's 'aimless wandering'. Julius resides in New York, a global power city whose transnational networks are tightly woven and highly visual; like many Americans, Julius is an immigrant, is invested with an outsider's view of American society, a perspective that is

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[92] Tim Gauthier, *9/11 Fictions, Empathy, and Otherness* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), p. 1.
[93] Timothy Brennan qtd. in Schoene, p. 12. See Timothy Brennan, 'The National Longing for Form' in *Nation and Narration: Post-Structuralism and the Culture of National Identity*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 44-70.
[94] Schoene, p. 12.
[95] Giles Foden, rev. of *Open City* by Teju Cole, *The Guardian,* 17 August 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/17/open-city-teju-cole-review> [accessed 19 February 2015].

not wholly domestic (one of the criticisms of post-9/11 literature) but which is nonetheless situated from within the United States. Thus, as Claire Messud writes, Julius has 'a cosmopolite's detachment from his American experience'.[96]

Two types of mobility, predicated on distance, dominate the cosmopolitan imaginary of *Open City*: flight and walking. *Open City* begins at the confluence of these two modes of transport and their attendant perspectives. Julius introduces the narrative by describing a route he discovered the previous year when he 'began to go on evening walks last fall'. The walks, he explains, provided 'a counterpoint to my busy days at the hospital' as a resident psychiatrist, and 'steadily lengthened, taking me farther and farther afield each time, so that I often found myself at quite a distance from home late at night'.[97] Julius's newly-acquired custom of 'aimless wandering' emerges around the same time as the 'habit of watching bird migrations from my apartment'; 'and', he adds, 'I wonder now if the two are connected.'[98] Though walking and flight are modes of transport with very different perspectives, they overlap in the figure of the *flâneur*. Although the *flâneur* is firmly planted on the ground and in the streets, he is defined by what Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson calls a 'disengagement that [...] depends upon the marked social distance which reproduces the physical distances of the bird's-eye view and panoramas in which contemporaries so often indulge.'[99] While Julius walks, his gaze is directed skyward and inclined to flight, including flights of fancy, as when he imagines a 'bird's-eye view' of New York:

> [...] I used to look out the window like someone taking auspices, hoping to see the miracle of natural immigration. Each time I caught sight of the geese swooping in formation across the sky, I wondered how our life might look from their perspective, and imagined that, were they ever to indulge in such speculation, the high-rises might seem to them like firs massed in a grove. Often, as I searched the sky, all I saw was rain, or the faint contrail of an airplane bisecting the window, and I doubted in some part of myself whether these birds, with their dark wings and throats, their pale bodies

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[96] Claire Messud, 'The Secret Sharer', *New York Review of Books*, (14 July 2011) <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/07/14/secret-sharer/> [accessed 5 February 2015].
[97] *OC*, p. 3.
[98] Ibid., p. 3-4.
[99] Ferguson offers this observation in the context of Victor Hugo's 'Paris à vol d'oiseau' in *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, 'The *Flâneur* On and Off the Streets of Paris', *The Flâneur*, ed. by Keith Tester (Oxford; New York, Routledge, 2015), pp. 24-39 (p. 31).

and tireless little hearts, really did exist. So amazed was I by them that I couldn't trust my memory when they weren't there.[100]

While walking presents a way of reading the palimpsestic human history of the city, for Cole, birds are 'a different form of life which has as little understanding of what it's about as we do, and the fact that they're aerial, so have a different point of view.'[101] Birds not only represent a wholly other experience of the world; the bird's eye view (or rather, from Julius's imagination of their perspective), provides a perspective through which *human* life would appear alien. This passage registers Julius's radical attempts to think empathetically – to imagine the perspective of an other form of life – and carries a dialectical complexity: on the one hand, the narrator ultimately arrogates wings to speak for birds only to invoke an anthropocentric understanding of the geese he observes; on the other hand, while Julius obviously cannot truly see *as* a bird, either visually or ontologically, his ground-level observations of their flight affords him (and the reader) an entirely different, more direct and encompassing view. In this opening passage, then, the ground and aerial views operate in exchange, each imagining the other as other. This is a sublime, even miraculous form of distance that allows the ground and aerial view to operate in exchange, each imagining the other as other: from his position on the ground looking upward, Julius imagines birds in flight looking toward the ground, wondering at the 'tiny, fragile human bod[ies]' (to quote Benjamin one more) of the humans below.[102]

Julius's imaginative exercise situates the novel within the cosmopolitan perspective of distance. From Greek antiquity through to Kant and beyond, cosmopolitan detachment is, as Amanda Anderson explains, structured by a 'cultivated' and 'reflective distance' from the 'restricted perspective[s] and interest[s] of the polis […] religion, class, and […] the absolutist state'.[103] Quoting George Eliot, Anderson asserts that distance 'helps us rise to a lofty point of observation, so that we may see things in their relative proportions'.[104] Yet, as Benjamin's 'Storyteller' attests, a distanced perspective may enable a more encompassing view where the 'great, simple outlines' of the storyteller are perceptible, but it also objectifies

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[100] *OC*, p. 4.

[101] Cole, interviewed by Nathalie Olah, 'Doors of Appropriation: Teju Cole Interviewed', *The Quietus*, 19 October 2014 < http://thequietus.com/articles/16509-teju-cole-interview-every-day-thief-open-city-nigeria-appropriation> [accessed 11 February 2015].

[102] 'The Storyteller', p. 143.

[103] Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 64.

[104] George Eliot qtd in Anderson, p. 3-4.

the human figure, rendering it 'tiny' and 'fragile'.[105] As much as a detached view can provide a less solipsistic approach to global relations, Anderson qualifies, 'distanced viewpoints elsewhere permit only broad outlines that obscure the crucial realities of lived experience.'[106] In other words, the cosmopolitan ethos of *openness* to difference often *erases* difference through its framework of detachment.

Near the end of the novel, the image of birds in flight recurs in a more disturbing context:

> Although it [the Statue of Liberty] has had its symbolic value right from the beginning, until 1902, it was a working lighthouse, the biggest in the country. In those days, the flame that shone from the torch guided ships into Manhattan's harbour; that same light, especially in bad weather, fatally disoriented the birds. The birds, many of which were clever enough to dodge the cluster of skyscrapers in the city, somehow lost their bearings when faced with a single monument. A large number of birds met their death in this matter. [...] one particularly stormy night, more than fourteen hundred dead birds were recovered from the crown [...] and [...] sold [...] to New York City milliners and fancy stores.[107]

This strikingly brutal image exposes the contradictions of the statue's 'symbolic value'. As Nasi Anam writes, the 'magnanimous gesture of welcoming' that the Statue of Liberty appears to incarnate becomes, in this passage, 'a rich metonym of the grand American experiment's collateral damage' (the bird's quasi-suicidal flight into a building rich in American symbolism is also a kind of metonymic analogue for images of planes flying into the World Trade Centre). [108] The statue's guiding light 'disorients' the birds to such an extent that it 'guides' them toward destruction. This disorienting view problematises the cosmopolitan perspective of flight by condensing the statue's contradictory symbolism, which connotes a place of refuge but also constitutes a border. In the novel, then, flight is dialectically constructed as both a 'miracle of immigration' and as a fatally disorienting concept that problematises the foundations of such cosmopolitan notions as hospitality, global citizenship, and 'cultivated detachment'. In the first image of flight, Cole presents an ideal image of cosmopolitan intersubjectivity; and in the last, he offers an utterly distorted but critical image of fatal disorientation. On the one hand, as Zlatko Skrbis and Ian

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[105] Benjamin, p. 143.
[106] George Eliot qtd in Anderson, p. 3-4; Anderson p. 4.
[107] *OC*, p. 259.
[108] Nasia Anam, 'The Migrant's Nervous Condition', *Post45,* 24 January 2017
<http://post45.research.yale.edu/2017/01/the-migrants-nervous-condition/> [accessed 3 March 2017].

Woodward write, '[t]here is something curiously cosmopolitan about seeing the world from above, flying well above land but gaining a new perspective on patterns of human and natural landscapes'; on the other hand, 'the perspective of flight is possibly both alienating and objectifying.'[109]

Taken together, the presentation of transcendence and catastrophic flight form the novel's downward arc from a celebration of cosmopolitanism to a much more pessimistic approach. Clearly, Julius fails to fulfil the aesthetic promise of cosmopolitan attachment his narrative attempts to perform – precisely because of his detached stance. Though he is presented with numerous opportunities to engage in a genuinely cosmopolitan encounter, these possibilities remain unfulfilled. Julius fails to offer his intellectual and perspectival hospitality towards the other, often marginalised, lives of the people he meets, and consequently fails to be ethically transformed or altered by their voices. One example of this failed cosmopolitanism appears early in the novel, when Julius recounts a visit to a detention facility run by a private security firm contracted by the Department of Homeland Security, a reminder of a less liberatory global confluence of migration, capitalism, and the security state whereby the refugee is both reviled as a criminal or a terrorist and desired as commodity. In the novel, the detention centre discomfits cosmopolitanism's lofty claims to universal belonging. Julius's trip occurs the earlier summer, before the time of the novel; the trip is organised by the 'Welcomers' (a name which denotes a generous ethic of hospitality), a church attended by his then-girlfriend, Nadège. He describes the congregants as 'a mix of human-rights types and church ladies', noting that the priest 'wore no shoes, a practice he had picked up during his long years of service in a rural parish in the Orinoco […] out of solidarity with the peasants he served, but […] he continued to be shoeless in New York to remind himself of others and their plight.' Julius's description establishes an ascetic scene of embodied empathy, but expresses his scepticism through a note of ridicule as he adds, '[t]he shoeless priest did not come with us to Queens.'[110] Julius also remarks, with extreme ambiguity, that '[m]ost of the group […] were women, many with that beatific, slightly unfocused expression one finds in do-gooders.'[111] Julius's motivation for the visit is less

[109] Zlatko Skrbis and Ian Woodward, *Cosmopolitanism: Uses of the Idea* (London: SAGE, 2013), p. 62. See also *Aeromobilities*, eds. Saulo Cwener, Sven Kesselring, John Urry (London; New York: Routledge, 2009).
[110] *OC*, p. 62.
[111] Ibid., p. 63.

pious; he joins the group because 'it seemed like an interesting way to get to know her better.'[112]

Officials at the facility select Julius to visit Saidu, a Liberian inmate. Saidu attempts to connect with Julius, and asks him if he is African and whether he is a Christian, to which Julius replies, 'I hesitated, then told him I supposed I was.' Saidu asks Julius to pray for him and tells him about the detention centre, before discussing the 'special relationship' between Liberia and America, whose 'names [even] bore a family resemblance: Liberia, America: seven letters each, four of which were shared.'[113] 'When the war began and everything started to crumble', Saidu tells Julius, he was sure the Americans would come in and solve the whole thing. But it hadn't been like that; the Americans had been reluctant to help, for their own reasons.'[114] Saidu continues to tell Julius the harrowing story of his life in Liberia where his 'mother and sister were shot in the second war, by Charles Taylor's men' , who forced him to work in a rubber factory; while there, he notices 'the best soccer player in school' whose 'right hand had been severed at the wrist'; after this, Saidu describes his flight from Liberia to the United States, a two-year long journey partly on foot – he walks from Nigeria to Guinea – and partly by hitchhiking, before finally flying from Lisbon to JFK Airport where he was detained by border guards.[115] When the visiting hour comes to an end and Saidu finishes his story, he asks Julius to visit him again 'if [he] is not deported.'[116] A single sentence is set between this paragraph and the next: 'I said that I would, but never did.'[117] After admitting that he never returned to the detention centre, Julius recalls how he told Saidu's story to Nadege, and wonders whether 'she fell in love with the idea of myself that I presented in that story: I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea of myself.'[118] Julius makes all the right cosmopolitan gestures, posing as a 'sympathetic ear'; but this is only an 'idea of myself that I presented in that story.'[119] Mediated by Julius through reported speech, Saidu establishes a poetic connection between two nations through a sort

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[112] Ibid., 62.
[113] Ibid., pp. 64-65
[114] Ibid., p. 65.
[115] Ibid., pp. 65-69.
[116] Ibid., p. 70.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid. Julius's wry observation that the priest did not attend the detention centre takes on a different, frustrating light: Julius does visit the detainees, and the hour that he spends with Saidu is a materially ethical act; but he fails to be affected by this encounter that turns out to be an empty gesture; meanwhile, though the priest doesn't visit inmates like Saidu, his ascetic refusal to wear shoes in solidarity with 'others and their plight' is a demonstration of genuine empathy and self-denial.

of numerological close reading of their names; thus the interconnection between populations and places is conjured aesthetically, but this connection is doubly disappointed: despite the history shared by Liberia and the United States, and despite America's claim to be the defender of human rights and democracy, 'the Americans had been reluctant to help, for their own reasons'; this is redoubled in miniature when Julius fails to be demonstrably affected by Saidu's testimony, despite being (aesthetically) 'absorbed' in the story; and despite posturing as a compassionate cosmopolitan, Julius fails to perform the act of solidarity requested of him. This passage foreshadows the novel's pattern, one that aesthetically stages and plots the intersubjective relation between an interlocutor and a witness that situates both within a network of connection and difference; but this potential is never realised, such that it is disenchanted and transformed into an aesthetics of alienation.

3.5 Alienated Aesthetics: The *Flâneur*

From where, this alienation? To make better sense of this, I will return to figure of the *flâneur*. Although international travel, flight, and the transnational polyphony of Julius's many interlocutors emphatically signal the novel's cosmopolitan texture, critics more commonly locate its cosmopolitanism in the figure of the *flâneur*, with whom Julius shares his habitual walks. For example, the novel prompts Bijan Stephen to ask 'might *flânerie* be due for a revival?' in order to combat the intensification of the conditions of modernity that created the nineteenth-century *flâneur*: 'urban life, alienation, class tensions' and the dilation of time caused by 'the influence of technology'.[120] Giles Foden's lucid review of *Open City* situates Cole's *flâneur* in the context of 'three city walkers out of literary history: the "strolling spectator" type which has informed the novel from its earliest days; the Baudelairean *flâneur* which transferred into fiction prose tales such as André Breton's *Nadja* […] and the roving "I" of European romantic modernism, which has found its most eloquent recent exponent in the work of W.G. Sebald.'[121] Pankaj Mishra establishes Julius as a reinvention of the *flâneur* as a 'more resourceful and cosmopolitan outsider' produced by the global networks he traverses.[122] Devin Zuber reframes the *flâneur* within the context of

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[120] Bijan Stephen, 'In Praise of the *Flâneur*', *The Paris Review*, 17 October 2013 <www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/10/17/in-praise-of-the-*flâneur*/> [accessed 8 June 2016].

[121] Giles Foden, rev. of *Open City* by Teju Cole, *The Guardian*, 17 August 2011 <www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/17/open-city-teju-cole-review> [accessed 19 February 2015]. I will address Cole's relationship to Sebald in the concluding section of this chapter.

[122] Pankaj Mishra, rev. of *Open City* by Teju Cole, *Financial Times*, 22 July 2011 <http://www.ft.com/content/8fc671da-b129-11e0-a43e-00144feab49a> [accessed 21 February 2015].

a post-9/11 cityscape, in particular the 'hyperpoliticised' space of Ground Zero: '[u]ltimately, the discursive, meandering trope of the *flâneur* might provide the best antidote for this kind of warmongering'.[123] Furthermore, in their review for *Los Angeles Review of Books,* Michelle Kuo and Albert Wu use the terms 'cosmopolitan' and '*flâneur*' interchangeably to describe Cole's narrator.[124] In this way, the *flâneur* becomes the metaphorical index to the novel's engagement with cosmopolitanism. This assessment is not unfounded: the *flâneur*, a figure Benjamin locates in the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades, thriving on the atomised city of nascent modernity, has often been identified as a cosmopolitan figure. Rebecca Walkowitz, borrowing a term from Homi K. Bhabha, asserts that *flânerie* is a form of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' by virtue of the *flâneur*'s traversal of liminal spaces, physical and conceptual boundaries, and ambiguous relation to commodity culture.[125] Bhabha defines vernacular cosmopolitanism as being 'on the border, *in between*, introducing the global cosmopolitan "action at a distance" into the very grounds – now displaced – of the domestic.'[126]

Just as the *flâneur* observes the city from a distance, cosmopolitanism 'endorses reflective distance from one's cultural affiliations, a broad understanding of other cultures and customs, and a belief in universal humanity.'[127] In other words, distance can be extrapolated to renounce identities and allegiances based on nationality, class, or religion under a rubric of global and universal belonging. The *flâneur* is likewise characterised by a detached, observer's gaze, through which he can comprehend and articulate the confused chaos of the city. I refer to the *flâneur* as 'he' because he is a rigidly gendered figure. The *flâneur* is a bourgeois white man who enjoys a level of anonymity that that women (the *flaneuse* traditionally appears as a sex worker), people of colour (whose navigation of public space is violently policed and delimited), workers (who lack the time to stroll) – and all the

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[123] Devin Zuber, '*Flânerie* at Ground Zero: Aesthetic Countermemories in Lower Manhattan', *American Quarterly,* 58.2 (June 2006), pp. 269-299 (p. 297). The 'warmongering' Zuber referring to in this instance is the smelting of girders from the World Trade Centre Towers for use in the construction of the USS *New York*, a battleship, arranged by New York Governer George Patacki in 2003.

[124] Michelle Kuo and Albert Wu, 'Imperfect Strollers: Teju Cole, Ben Lerner, W.G. Sebald, and the Alienated Cosmopolitan', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2 February 2013 <http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/imperfect-strollers-teju-cole-ben-lerner-w-g-sebald-and-the-alienated-cosmopolitan/> [accessed 8 February 2015].

[125] Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 9.

[126] Homi K. Bhabha, 'Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism', *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*, ed. by Gregory Castle (Oxford; Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 38-52 (p. 48).

[127] Anderson, p. 7.

intersections of those identities – do not. As Julius remarks during his trip to Brussels, '[m]y presentation – the dark, unsmiling, solitary stranger – made me a target for the inchoate rage of the defenders of Vlaanderen.'[128] Even still, there is a tradition of *flânerie* that does not centre around the privileged figure associated with the white male leisure class: George Sand, Kate Chopin, and Christa Wolff make use of the 'walking woman', the female *flâneuse*; and Black Atlantic writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Ralph Ellison explore the experience of the black *flâneur*, which James Edward Smethurst describes as 'combin[ing] of Baudelairean peripatetic Paris […] and Kafkaesque claustrophobic Prague'.[129] Walking home one night, Julius takes 'a detour' through Harlem, presenting a kaleidoscopic portrait of the 'sidewalk salesmen: the Senegalese cloth merchants, the young men selling bootleg DVDs, the Nation of Islam stalls […] dashikis, posters of black liberation, and little tourist tchotchkes from Africa'. It is a visibly black space; an unknown man 'raise[s] his head to meet' Julius, in a gesture that doesn't strictly signal anonymity, but a recognition that they are both in a space where their identities are not interpellated as black by the white gaze: '[i]n the Harlem night, there were no whites'.[130]

The defining feature of the *flâneur* is not so much his anonymity as it is his isolation and detachment. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson neatly summarises the *flâneur*'s relational distance from the city and its inhabitants: 'the *flâneur* reads the city as he would read a text – from a distance.'[131] When Benjamin describes the *flâneur* as 'a man uprooted […] at home neither in his class nor in his homeland, but *only on the ground*', he provides an account of the *flâneur* that resonates with contemporary frameworks of cosmopolitan subjectivity and states of exile.[132] This detachment allows the *flâneur* to perceive, read, and reveal (as Baudelaire did) 'the mythical secrets of society, especially when society has forgotten about

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[128] *OC*, p. 106.

[129] James Edward Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), p. 114. See also Doreen St. Félix, 'The Perils of Black Mobility', *Good Issue*, 29 March 2016 < https://www.good.is/features/issue-36-flanerie> [accessed 27 May 2017]; Adebayo Williams, 'The Postcolonial *Flâneur* and Other Fellow Travellers: Conceits for a Narrative of Redemption', *Third World Quarterly,* 18.5 (1997), pp. 821-841; Anke Gleber, 'Women on the Screens and Streets of Modernity: In Search of the Female *Flâneur*', *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*, ed. by Dudley Andrew (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997) pp. 55-86; Jane Wolff, 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity', *Theory, Culture and Society* 2.3 (1985), pp. 37-46.

[130] *OC*, p. 18.

[131] Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, 'The *Flâneur* On and Off the Streets of Paris', *The Flâneur*, ed. by Keith Tester (Oxford; New York, Routledge, 2015), pp. 24-39 (p. 31).

[132] Benjamin, 'Exposé of 1935', *AP*, p. 895.

them and they function unconsciously.'[133] The 'uprooted' *flâneur* thus appears to follow the cosmopolitan rejection of monolithic identity markers – class, birthplace/nation – in favour of the multiplicity – and anonymity – of the crowd. These accounts imply a dialectical interplay of proximity and distance in the respective, but often overlapping, discourses of cosmopolitanism and *flânerie*: the cosmopolitan affects *detachment* in order to comprehend and enact 'multiple or flexible *attachments* to more than one nation or community'; likewise, the *flâneur*, as Burton writes, 'stands apart from the city even as he appears to "fuse" with it; he interprets each of its components in isolation in order […] to attain intellectual understanding of the whole as a complex system of meaning.'[134] The *flâneur* becomes the allegorist of modernity, reading the hermetic secrets of the city and gathering them into a dynamic hermeneutic network that constantly shifts with the protean urban topography.

At first sight, Julius is the 'ideal' *flâneur*. He intrepidly 'sets out into the city' as a 'counterpoint' to his hectic work as a resident psychiatrist, enabling both an escape from and an immersion within the rhythm of the city, which 'work[s] itself' into his 'life at walking pace.' Julius exhilarates in his 'aimless progress', for him a 'reminder of freedom' and a subversion of the regimented order of the 'countless' commuters he weaves through on his way to 'find the line that connected me to my part in these stories'.[135] Yet, as I have already discussed, Julius fails to employ his detached position to achieve this goal; as a cosmopolitan, he is unable to forge any meaningful ties out of his transnational encounters with others; and as a 'twenty-first century *flâneur*', he is able to read traces of repressed histories in the city, but incapable of directing those insights toward his own 'part in' – and responsibility toward – 'these stories.'

If the *flâneur* is a figure capable of transcending boundaries, as Walkowitz and others claim, Julius's incapacity to meaningfully relate to others frustrates the linked paradigms of *flânerie* and cosmopolitanism. In order to account for this paradox, Vermeulen's otherwise shrewd analysis of *Open City* all but excludes the figure of the *flâneur*, asserting that its 'dark counterpart', the *fugueur*, is a more appropriate model for Julius and his habitual walks. Vermeulen derives the concept of the *fugueur* from Ian Hacking's monograph *Mad Travelers: Reflections of the Reality of Transient Mental Illnesses,* according to which a

[133] Brent S. Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts* (New York; London: Routledge, 2005), p. 79.

[134] Burton qtd. in Alan Bairner, 'Urban Walking and the Pedagogies of the Street', *New Directions in Social Theory, Education and Embodiment,* ed. by John Evans and Brian Davies (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 109-122 (p. 112).

[135] *OC*, p. 3; p. 7; p. 59.

'fugue epidemic' took place in tandem with the *flâneur* in the late nineteenth-century. The *fugueur* was one such 'mad traveller' who succumbed to the sudden compulsion to wander away from home and experienced amnesia when they were returned. According to Vermeulen, the *fugueur* embodies the novel's 'more obscure meaning: a dissociative mental condition that the novel renders through its affectless tone, and that warns readers not to mistake aesthetic transport for cosmopolitan achievement.' Vermeulen even goes to far as to quote the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic Statistic Manual* (*DSM*) entry for 'dissociative fugue' and diagnoses Julius with a dissociative disorder. There are several problems with this interpretation. First, in order to account for Julius's cosmopolitan failures, Vermeulen characterises the protagonist as the *flâneur*'s antithesis, the *fugueur* – which 'cosmopolitan discourses cannot contain' – in order to mark the limits of aesthetic cosmopolitanism. Second, although in many contexts it is both useful and illuminating to apply psychoanalytic theory to literary fiction (as I have earlier in this chapter and elsewhere in this thesis), diagnosing a fictional character with a mental illness is, in this context at least, a limited line of reasoning. The terms with which Vermeulen proposes this argument are problematic, to say the least: Vermeulen introduces the *fugueur* as a 'sinister […] figure' and, having diagnosed Julius with a dissociative disorder, refers to the *fugueur*-narrator's 'sinister cosmopolitan dissociation' as 'staging a more sinister form of life'.[136] Aside from imbuing mental illness – which is already routinely demonised across various discourses and in various institutions – with a 'sinister' quality, Vermeulen minimises Julius's agency (Julius's act of 'forgetting links Julius's psychological association to a failure of memory, even to amnesia, while the rest of the novel raises the question of its relations to his incessant walking') and therefore his culpability for Moji's rape.[137] By implicitly diminishing Julius's responsibility for violence, Vermeulen detracts from the ethical stakes of the text.

Vermeulen discounts the *flâneur* because, although it has been 'condemned as a fatally bourgeois figure' he nonetheless 'emerges from Baudelaire's and Benjamin's work as a dialectical figure […] who anticipates a cosmopolitan ethos that thrives on intercultural curiosity and the virtues of the aesthetic': this is curious, because the assumption that the *flâneur* possesses a 'cosmopolitan ethos' is based on accounts of the *flâneur* produced by the cosmopolitan discourses (especially Walkowitz) Vermeulen (again, justifiably) criticises. Vermeulen abandons his cosmopolitan frame of reference and turns to psychology

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[136] Vermeulen, p. 84; p. 101; p. 82.
[137] Ibid., p. 102.

to explain the weaknesses within cosmopolitan discourse that *Open City* stages; and he views Cole as deploying a figure that destabilises the cosmopolitan ethos in order to dislodge its inconsistencies, rather than locate instability within certain strains of cosmopolitanism itself. If we are to take the claim that *Open City* critiques the tendency in cosmopolitanism and human rights discourse at large to turn to aesthetics instead of praxis seriously, as Vermeulen rightly suggests it does, pathologising the narrator will not do. It seems to me that a more direct approach would be to locate these limitations from *within* the bounds of cosmopolitan discourse itself – more specifically, within the figure of *flâneur* itself. What Vermeulen pathologises as a psychological fugue state is, in fact, a conceptual problem of detachment. Vermeulen is not the only one to dissociate Julius from the figure of the *flâneur*; in their review of *Open City*, Michelle Kuo and Albert Wu contrast Cole's 'alienated cosmopolitan' with the ideal cosmopolitanism of the Baudelairean *flâneur* who is 'everywhere at home'.[138] Wu and Kuo conclude that Cole's *flâneur* is a 'different creature' from Baudelaire's stroller and as such 'reflect[s] a radical break from the [nineteenth-century] vision of the *flâneur*'.[139] The difficulty these critics find in identifying Julius as a *flâneur* pivots around the matter of extreme detachment, of alienation; because their understanding of the *flâneur* is based on accounts which emphasise the liberatory, critically-engaged aspects of the *flâneur*, qualities that are essentially irreconcilable with Julius's character. From Wu and Kuo's and Vermeulen's view, Julius cannot be a *flâneur* because he fails to 'thrive on intercultural curiosity and the virtues of the aesthetic'; he must therefore be a 'different creature' (the *fugueur*). Yet these accounts are in part produced by the literary cosmopolitanism Vermeulen (via Cole) criticises. I argue that Julius does, in fact, find a model in the *flâneur* and that it is *through* this figure that Cole interrogates contemporary currents of literary cosmopolitanism. In other words, by exploding the myth of the cosmopolitan *flâneur*, Cole simultaneously questions the efficacy of a cosmopolitanism based on 'aesthetic transport' alone.[140]

Both Walkowitz and Vermeulen approach the *flâneur* in more emancipatory terms than Benjamin – who in actuality describes the *decline* of the *flâneur* – originally proposed. Of all of Benjamin's figures of thought, the *flâneur* is perhaps the most ambiguous. The

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[138] Michelle Kuo and Albert Wu, 'Imperfect Strollers: Teju Cole, Ben Lerner, W.G. Sebald, and the Alienated Cosmopolitan', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2 February 2013 <http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/imperfect-strollers-teju-cole-ben-lerner-w-g-sebald-and-the-alienated-cosmopolitan/> [accessed 8 February 2015].
[139] Ibid.
[140] Vermeulen, p. 91.

flâneur's detached stance allows him to brush the city against the grain of the capitalist production of space; his meandering route resists the purposeful rhythms of the commuter and the shopper which enables him to read the city's secret history and remap its prescribed boundaries. This detachment, which makes the *flâneur* the premier interpreter of modernity, emerges as a response to the overwhelming 'superabundance of images and stimuli' in the nascent city of modernity.[141] Julius reiterates the *flâneur*'s experience when he describes entering the subway: 'Above-ground I was with thousands of others in their solitude, but in the subway, standing so close to strangers, jostling them and being jostled by them for space and breathing room, all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified.'[142] This echoes Baudelaire's complaint: 'lost in this ugly world, jostled by the crowds', a condition Sanja Bahun describes as 'populated solitude'.[143] The very scale of modern urban experience means that relations are anonymised, distant despite the growing proximity of city-dwellers to one another: '[w]alking through busy parts of town meant I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousands even, than I was accustomed to seeing in the course of a day.'[144] To combat this isolation and derive meaning from the sensorily overstimulating city, the *flâneur* cultivates a stance of detachment. Put simply, in order to see – to comprehend – the city, the *flâneur* must place himself at one remove from it and resist being swept up in the crowd. But his detachment, like his alienation, is predicated on the crowd's existence – as Ferguson further explains, the *flâneur* 'requires the city and its crowds […] yet remains aloof from both.'[145] But this response is not so much a resistance to the atomised experience of the urban metropolis as a reflection of it, and his desire for anonymity, to stand apart from the crowd – even as he stands in it – is in fact an attempt to assert individuality – to elevate himself above the crowd like a bird – a pursuit Rob Shields describes as 'a course which alienates him from even the possibility of a deeper inter-subjective exchange with the other members of the crowd scene.'[146] This is precisely the course Julius follows.

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[141] Carlo Salzani, *Constellations of Reading: Walter Benjamin in Figures of Actuality*, (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 44.
[142] *OC*, p. 7.
[143] Baudelaire qtd. in Sanja Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 51; Bahun, ibid.
[144] *OC*, p. 6.
[145] Ferguson, p. 28.
[146] Rob Shields, 'Fancy Footwork: Walter Benjamin's Notes on Flanerie', *The Flâneur*, ed Keith Tester, pp. 61-80 (p. 77).

Finally, the *flâneur* was never cosmopolitan, but a figure whose historiographic *potential* passed away with the closure of the Arcades and the further privatisation of space; even in Benjamin's time, the *flâneur* was becoming obsolete – it is the passing of the *flâneur* into its cultural afterlife that *The Arcades Project* records. This potential, however, was always delimited by the *flâneur*'s disinterested spectatorship and sovereign position, over and above the crowd, of observation. Such a position is the genesis of Julius's ethical blind spot and forecloses any meaningful social action he half-heartedly performs. The indecisiveness that forms the narrator's aleatory itinerary foreshadows Julius's rejection of Farouq and Khalid, who 'believe foremost in difference', because of his 'distrust of causes' which remind him, 'I was so essentially indecisive myself'.[147] Convinced that 'a cancerous violence had eaten into every political idea', Julius concludes that 'the only way this lure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties'.[148]

This points to the dangers of Benjamin's fragment on the *flâneur*'s ambiguous movement: 'The underlying indecision of the *flâneur* […] having doubts seems to be the *flâneur*'s state […] [m]ovement with the feeling of doubts'.[149] In order to stay within his observational vantage point, the *flâneur* is unable to secure his moral convictions. The *flâneur*'s eye consumes images; it is not an eye that makes 'eye contact', which would establish an intersubjective connection, or of 'looking someone in the eye' in a way that would constitute an empathic, accountable gaze. Carlo Salzani notes how the *flâneur* is 'the human equivalent of visual multiplicity and mobility', a 'moving eye' emblematic of modernity's collective gaze.[150] But this also contributes to the *flâneur*'s 'ontological ambiguity' as the self – the 'moving I' – is metonymically displaced by the 'moving eye'.[151] This detached eye, which elevates the *flâneur* into a figure of modernity, is also the death of the *flâneur* because its 'guarded detachment' inheres in a 'lack of engagement and emotional responsibility'. Julius's 'doubts' are not the doubts of an observer engaged in critical scrutiny (at least not any longer) but the *irresolution* that hesitantly circumvents moral culpability.

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[147] *OC*, p. 144; p. 198.
[148] Ibid., p. 107.
[149] *AP*, [M4a,1], p. 425.
[150] Salzani, p. 45.
[151] Shields, p. 57.

3.6 'The Sebald Thing'

In her superb essay on *Open City* (to which I have referred throughout this chapter), Freedman poses the novel's most urgent question, which she describes as 'Cole's problem and his project': 'is there a measure or a method that can avoid the sensuous exploitation that serves as an act of voyeurism rather than an act of witness?'[152] This question not only informs Cole's novel but, more broadly, post-9/11 fiction as a whole, which finds itself in the midst of a representation crisis where trauma and spectacle have become difficult (but essential) to distinguish. Whether trauma can be represented without descending into voyeurism, *and* whether a method of representation can serve as an act of witness are two inflections of this question which perhaps no one has explored more intently than W.G. Sebald.

Their shared concerns with trauma, representation, witnessing and testimony has led to a glut of comparisons linking Cole to Sebald. This is particularly true for reviews of the novel, which almost compulsively categorise *Open City* as a 'Sebaldian' text: the novel's digressive style, the episodic form, and the 'sly faux antiquarianism' of Cole's syntax all suggest Sebald's influence. James Wood writes that the novel 'move[s] in the shadow' of Sebald's work, while novelist Anthony Doerr boldly claims that Cole 'might just be a W.G. Sebald for the twenty-first century'.[153] Like Sebald's protagonists, Julius begins his narrative by describing his sudden compulsion to walk through New York City: 'And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall [as a] counterpoint to my busy days at the hospital […] I often found myself at quite a distance from home late at night […]'.[154] These perambulatory adventures coincide with another habit of 'watching bird migrations from my apartment'.[155] Indeed, the reason for and function of Julius's walks is strikingly similar to that of *The Rings of Saturn*: 'In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold […] whenever I have completed a long stint of work'.[156] Sebald's narrator is later 'taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility', which leads him to wonder if it was caused

[152] Freedman, p. 182.
[153] James Wood, 'The Arrival of Enigmas', rev. of *Open City* by Teju Cole, *The New Yorker*, 28 February 2011 < http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/28/the-arrival-of-enigmas> [accessed 5 February 2015]; Anthony Doerr, *OC*, front matter, n.p.
[154] *OC*, p. 3.
[155] Ibid., p. 4.
[156] Sebald, W.G. *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 3. Serendipitously, 1992 is the year Julius leaves Nigeria for New York.

by walks conducted 'under the sign of the Dog Star', believed by the ancient Greeks to be a harbinger of summer heat and, in medieval iconography, the madness of melancholy. Julius, too, is prey to the afflictions of melancholy, and his fatiguing walks appear to put him in an ecstatic (but not a fugue) state where he receives alarming visions of historical violence that persist in the present.

Yet, for each of these comparisons, there is a qualifying point of contrast: David Evans writes of 'the chinks […] in Julius's cultivated veneer […] perhaps even a kind of solipsism' while James Wood concedes that it [is] apparent that Cole is attempting something different from Sebald's project'.[157] There are a several moments in which *Open City* subverts direct comparisons between the two authors, and suggest a less straightforward model of influence than critics like Doerr suggests. Most resonant of this vexed relationship is Julius's encounter with Farouq, the Moroccan manager of an internet café the protagonist frequents on his visit to Brussels. Farouq, who offers Julius hospitality and friendship, is subtly portrayed as a Benjamin-like figure whose thesis, a study of Bachélard's *Poetics of Space* ('I was going to […] use it as a basis for societal critique') was rejected on spurious grounds of plagiarism which cloaked Islamophobic (intertwined with xenophobic) sentiments that followed in the wake of 11 September ('My thesis committee had met on September 20, 2001').[158] During a conversation about Moroccan literature, Julius mentions the author Tahar Ben Jelloun. Farouq remarks on the author's 'big reputation' with 'a note of disapproval' and later:

> [H]e writes out of a certain idea of Morocco […] You see, people Like Ben Jelloun have the life of a writer in exile, and this gives them a certain – here Farouq paused, struggling to find the right word – it gives them a certain *poeticity,* can I say this, in the eyes of the West. To be a writer in exile is a great thing. But what is exile now, when everyone goes and comes freely?[159]

Farouq's speech rejects romantic notions of exile emptied of their political weight and appropriated by those fortunate enough to have the privilege of freedom of movement. This passage gestures toward the complicated relationship between *Open City* and, for example, *The Emigrants* when it comes to interconnecting notions of exile, cosmopolitanism, globalisation, and national identity. While Sebald himself modestly rejected the title of

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[157] See previous note.
[158] *OC*, p. 128.
[159] Ibid., p. 104, original italics.

'exile', uncritical perceptions of the author continue to perpetuate his quasi-mythical status as a melancholy exile whose alienation from his homeland causes restless wandering and a permanent sense of foreignness.[160] While this is admittedly a fairly reductive account of the often-excellent work written on Sebald, it is intended to emphasise the ways in which scholarship too often works purely toward confirming, and, in that process, fetishising its subject.[161] Stuart Taberner highlights this mythologizing tendency of critics toward Sebald's status as an 'exile' whose physical detachment from his homeland enables the author to transcendentally engage in a 'universal' history – wherein he is transformed from a German into a European writer. But as Taberner forcefully notes, 'exile […] does not necessarily correspond with a more profound concern with universal humanity […] to abstract Sebald from contemporary German debates via a problematic mythologisation of his status as an outsider also generates an uncommon generosity in the interpretation of his literary texts'.[162] Taberner's article brings the more problematic aspects of Sebald to the fore: what exactly is the ethical relation of the detached observer (in many of Sebald's texts, the protagonists are not only exiles, but tourists)? Does indirect confrontation really provide meaningful restitution, or does it merely co-opt victims' experiences into aesthetic emblems of world-melancholy?

The crude subtext beneath the reception of Cole as a 'twenty-first century W.G. Sebald' appears to be, 'what if Sebald had written about 9/11?' – a question that speaks to the vexed question of representing 9/11, as well as the tendency (elucidated by Bond) of 9/11 discourse to appropriate Holocaust narratives. In an interview, Cole firmly asserts his other influences, such as V.S. Naipul, Kazuo Ishiguro, J.M. Coetzee, and the Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar Wai. That Cole has other influences – and indeed his own autonomy as a writer and artist – should be strongly noted. Cole adds that 'the Sebald thing can obscure a key issue in the book: this is a narrative troubled from beginning to end by Julius's origin

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[160] See Lynn L. Wolff's discussion in *W.G. Sebald's Hybrid Poetics: Literature as Historiography* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2014).

[161] For a fuller discussion of Sebald as the object of scholarly fetishism, see Lecia Rosenthal, *Mourning Modernism: Literature, Catastrophe, and the Politics of Consolation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011). Rosenthal rightly recognises Sebald as 'the object of feverish scholarly attention and critical desire', a phenomenon that 'pose[s] important if perhaps presently unanswerable questions, not least of which is how we address and explain […] the quality, space, and work of desire that has come to circulate around Sebald's name and writings.' She further connects this desire to the 'fantasy of critical distance […] Under such terms, criticism would be appear fated to merely worship the object as sacred or fetishise its auratic surplus value', 94.

[162] Stuart Taberner, 'German Nostalgia? Re-membering German-Jewish Life in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten* and Austerlitz', *The German Review*, 79.3 (2004), pp. 181-202 (p. 182).

in Africa. It is a book about historical memory, it is an African book, it is a city book, and it is a book about male privilege. Only one of those things is properly Sebaldian.'[163] Cole's statement is key to thinking about how *Open City* engages with Sebald's work. Sebald's narrators are white European men; Cole translates their melancholy, perambulatory mode of narration into his novel, but focalises it through the perspective of a black, African protagonist who, though he enjoys the privileges accorded to a resident doctor, must negotiate issues of racism and racial identity in New York that are very different from Sebald's nameless protagonists, whose reception as a 'pure narrator' almost certainly has some relation to the 'fantasy' of the 'invisibility of whiteness *as* whiteness.'[164] Cole's decision to write Julius's visit Belgium, and his meditation on its colonial atrocities, is surely more political than a simple homage to Sebald.

As Karen Jacobs notes, 'where Sebald explores traumatic dislocation at mid-century, Cole picks up that subject at the millennium […] and where Sebald concentrates on the Jewish diaspora […] Cole devotes his novel to a range of African migrations chiefly to American shores.' Jacobs concludes this summary with an important point of difference which suggests that Cole shifts Sebald's literary paradigm: '[b]ecause those African migrations derive from such myriad, distinctive, and dispersed […] contexts and crises, they lack the ready organizing framework and exhaustive documentation that rank among the equivocal legacies of the Second World War. Cole's novel arguably steps in to provide such a framework.'[165] While Sebald's narrators experience acute transgenerational guilt, extrapolating from that a more general sorrow directed at Europe's brutal colonial past, Cole's Nigerian narrator has a completely different relationship to the history of colonisation, and the context of his historical memory is shaped by the experiences and traumas of the colonised. In effect, Cole is engaged in a spatio-temporal remapping of Sebald that does not centre the (white) European gaze. To be clear, Cole is not minimising the achievement of Sebald's work, nor is he delegitimising the obvious merits of Sebald's narrative strategies. My discussion of Cole and Sebald is prompted less by their stylistic

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[163] Cole interviewed by by Aaron Bady, *Post45*, 19 January 2015 <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2015/01/interview-teju-cole/> [accessed 10 February 2015].
[164] Sam Sacks, 'The Rise of the Nameless Narrator', *The New Yorker*, 3 March 2015 <www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-rise-of-the-nameless-narrator> [accessed 17 May 2018]; Reddy, Maureen T., 'Invisibility/Hypervisibility: The Paradox of Normative Whiteness', *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, 9.2 (Fall 1998), pp. 55-64 (p. 55).
[165] Karen Jacobs, 'Teju Cole's Photographic Afterimages', *Image & Narrative*, 15.2 (2014), pp. 87-105. Jacobs's article is an invaluable source on Cole's novel and the only study to engage in a sustained discussion of Sebald's influence in *Open City*.

resemblances and more by the interpellation of *Open City* as a 'Sebaldian' novel and what 'Sebaldian' might mean. If, schematically speaking, Cole radically shifts Sebald's frames of reference, replacing Europe with the United States, the German exile with the Nigerian emigré, histories of the coloniser to histories of the colonised, and so on, then this reframing also applies to the ethical position of the narrator and the question of guilt.

The question of distance figured in discourses of cosmopolitanism and *flânérie* (points of reference Sebald's work also crosses) manifests itself again when we approach Cole's relationship to Sebald and their ethics. In Sebald's work, distance is mobilised as a narrative ethic that avoids exploiting trauma by keeping a respectful distance from his fictional interlocuters, allowing them the space to voice their traumatic histories. Distance also figures in the traumatised characters' dislocation from their repressed past; for example, Austerliz, whose childhood is a distant, repressed memory he attempts of uncover. There is the additional matter of Sebald's own small but significant distance from the atrocities perpetrated by his parent's generation, a distance that engenders a sense of transitive guilt, as well as anger at the cultural amnesia he perceives in post-war Germany. Ivan Stacy elucidates Sebald's practice of 'belated witnessing' in terms of Dori Laub's 'three levels of witnessing': 'the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.'[166] Following Laub's paradigm, Stacy notes that Sebald is 'situated at the second and third of these levels'.[167] Based on these forms of witnessing, which are structured by degrees of distance, Sebald's narrators are situated as 'interviewer-listeners' who '[take] on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he bore alone'; it is this 'encounter […] between the survivor and the listener, which makes possible […] a repossession of the act of witness. This joint responsibility is the source of the re-emerging truth.'[168] Laub's model of witnessing describes the general structure of Sebald's work, and although Cole's novel stages potential encounters of the kind Laub describes, this potential is unfulfilled, and the ethical infrastructure of *Open City* begins to crumble as Julius's narrative self-destructs. If Sebald's work is based on an ontological and ethical distance from

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[166] Dori Laub qtd. in Ivan Stacy, '"The Roche Limit": Digression and Return in W.G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*', *Contemporary Trauma Narratives: Liminality and the Ethics of Form*, ed. by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (New York; Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 176-192 (p. 178).
[167] Stacey, ibid.
[168] Laub, 'An Event Without Witness', *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History,* ed. by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 74-92 (p. 85).

trauma, *Open City* probes the extent to which his literary model can or should be used as a template for the ongoing traumas of the present.

Since Sebald's enthusiastic reception by England and the United States, and the flood of Sebald criticism that followed, these recognisably 'Sebaldian' strategies have become signifiers of an ethical aesthetics. Sebald's narrative ethics are focalised through a narrator who, though haunted by transgenerational guilt, is transparently committed to witnessing traumatic testimonies. This witnessing is mobilised in a 'sober, impersonal' tone which reproduces the narrative ethos of approaching traumatic events 'obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation', which is echoed in Julius's 'flat affect', but with diametrically opposed results.[169] By adapting Sebald's tropes and stylistics, Cole plays on the presupposition that his Sebaldian narrator is an ethical witness who will achieve some measure of restitution through acts of memory. As Julius's catalogue of disappointed encounters unfurls itself around Sebaldian tropes, *Open City* reminds the reader that ethical semiotics do not guarantee ethical action. Julius's unreliable narration requires a level of critical engagement that interrogates the reliability of aesthetic markers and their encoded ethical claims. (I want to pause for a moment to note Cole is the only source on *Open City* who has asserted that it is a novel about about 'male privilege' – that Julius is a male narrator contributes strongly to his assumed reliability, perhaps even more so than his 'Sebaldian qualities.') In this way, Cole remains faithful to Sebald's sceptical approach to representation (which led him to his hybrid mix of documentary and fiction and his juxtaposition of images with text). Unlike Sebald, whose novels address 'the German desire to silence and end witness', Cole's novel emerges from a post-millennial context where conscious attempts to mourn and memorialise 9/11 frequently resulted in both the repression and appropriation of other traumatic histories.[170] Both Sebald and Cole explore the vicissitudes of memory and erasure, but where Sebald's novels approach these from the perspective of memory, Cole's novel enters this discussion from the standpoint of erasure; this experiment reveals that modes of forgetting and remembrance may overlap at various aesthetic points. This is not to say that Cole exposes a failed paradigm in Sebald's work, but that extracting a programmatic aesthetic from Sebald's novels under the rubric 'Sebaldian' does not constitute an ethical

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[169] Julia Hell, 'The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes, or the Gothic Beauty of Catastrophic History in W.G. Sebald's 'Air War and Literature'', *Criticism,* 48.3 (Summer 2004), pp. 361-391 (p. 368); Carol Jacobs, *Sebald's Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. xi.
[170] James Wood, 'An Interview with W.G. Sebald', *Brick*, 59 (Spring 1998) <http://brickmag.com/an-interview-with-w-g-sebald/> [accessed July 2017].

aesthetics, but an aesthetics of the ethical. Put simply, Cole's novel cautions against the displacement of the ethical into the aesthetic, a lure that deludes the narrator and, initially, deceives the reader. Though Cole affixes a Sebaldian gaze to Julius, it does not endow him with ethical vision – this constitutes an insight: the ethical dimensions of Sebald's texts is not primarily located in the aesthetic, but in his narrator's ethical solvency. In other words, the ethical infrastructure of Sebald's texts is mobilised and maintained by a *reliable narrator*. These saintly protagonists do not indicate a weakness, but a virtuous vulnerability, which leaves Sebald's work open to dialogue and prevents the systematisation of his narrative strategies. In highlighting this vulnerability, Cole continues Sebald's struggle to find a form adequate to representing acts of witness and restitution.

3.7 Anamorphosis

After Sebald, after 9/11, the reader can no longer rely on a narrator to provide an ethical frame of reference. Julius himself reminds the reader of this a few pages before Moji's testimony in the second part of the novel (which is prefaced by the epigraph, 'I have searched myself'):

> Each person must, on some level, take himself as the calibration point for normalcy, must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be, entirely opaque to him. Perhaps this is what we mean by sanity: that […] we are not the villains of our own stories. In fact, it is quite the contrary: we play, and only play, the hero, and in the swirl of other people's stories, insofar as those stories concern us at all, we are never less than heroic? We have the ability to do both good and evil, and more often than not, we choose the good. When we don't, neither we nor our imagined audience is troubled […] because we have, through our other decisions merited their sympathy. They are ready to believe the best about us […][171]

The audience is, in fact, troubled. Julius implicitly describes the reader-audience's adoption of '[his] point of view' and their erstwhile faith in the story Julius has told until now. The meditation on good and evil initially suggests that Julius has begun to consider his responsibility for Moji's trauma, but the passage takes an alarming turn. Having 'searched himself', Julius insists that '*even* without claiming any especially heightend [sic] sense of ethics', he has 'hewed close to the good.' This excursus on ethics and narration at first appears merely philosophical, in line with the melancholy tenor sustained throughout the

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[171] *OC*, p. 245.

novel; but on re-reading, it becomes densely ironic and somewhat difficult to unravel. Julius continues:

> And so, what does it mean when, in someone else's version, I am the villain? I am only too familiar with bad stories – badly imagined, badly told – because I hear them frequently from patients. I know the tells of those who blame others, those who are unable to see that they themselves, and not the others, are the common thread in their bad relationships. There are characteristic tics that reveal the essential falsehood of such narratives. But what Moji had said to me that morning […] had nothing in common with those stories. She had said it as if, with all of her being, she were certain of its accuracy.[172]

In describing the 'tells' and 'tics' of 'bad stories', Julius shows his hand, revealing the 'essential falsehood' of his own narrative. This supremely ironic passage undermines Julius's ethical self-fashioning and reveals the dialectical structure of Cole's novel. It also marks Cole's divergence from Sebald's method even as it continues to engage with his oblique, sober style of narration. As Kaisa Kaakinen brilliantly observes, 'the distant and melancholic tone of the narrator begins to look like a symptom of avoidance and disavowal.'[173] The irony that protrudes from this passage alerts us to a double voice comprised of Julius's narration and the text itself that is initially indistinguishable: the reader suddenly realises whose 'version' they have been following up to now. Moreover, it testifies to a pre-existing counternarrative in the text that (to paraphrase Grootenboer) the reader did not see in the first place, but which erupts into the frame of Julius's carefully composed discourse.[174]

This counternarrative, which allows us to recognise the novel's 'double story', leads me to revisit anamorphosis, a concept introduced at the start of this chapter, where I drew a

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[172] Ibid.

[173] Kaisa Kaakinen, 'Melancholy and the Narration of Transnational Trauma in W.G. Sebald and Teju Cole', *Storytelling and Ethics, Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative*, eds. Hannah Meretoja and Colin Davis (New York; London, Routledge, 2017; repr. 2018), pp.160-178 (p. 170). Kaakinen's excellent essay was first published on 18 September 2017 and makes many assertions similar to those made by this thesis, which was originally submitted on 2 October 2017. Kaakinen's essay is a comparative reading of Cole and Sebald, and comes to the same general conclusion as this chapter: that Cole's novel draws out the limits of Sebald's narrative ethics and melancholy, oblique relation to history. But Kaakinen does not suggest that Cole himself mounts a critique of Sebald's method by appropriating his style, tone, and motifs, as I do in this chapter. Kaakinen briefly discusses Moji's testimony but does not take it as the central moment that explodes the ethical framework of the narrative. In addition, the Sebaldian element of Cole's novel is just of the three instances of generic 'anamorphosis' that I have attempted to describe.

[174] Vermeulen's study of *Open City* explores this counternarrative in terms of the contrapuntal technique of the fugue form.

link between *Open City*'s first epigraph ('Death is a perfection of the eye') and *The Ambassadors*, Holbein's eminently strange 'double portrait'. It is a portrait of the French ambassador Jean de Dinteville, and a religious emissary, George de Selve, the Bishop of Lauvar. These figures pose among a heterogenous array of hermetic objects that are self-consciously emblematic of epistemological power: instruments of science such as an arithmetic book, an astrolabe, a gnomon, and objects connected to spiritual knowledge – a lute (with a broken string), a hymn book, and a celestial globe. Most famously, there is a blurred figure that cuts through the foreground and which, when viewed from a skewed angle, resolves into a grimacing skull. Even before it is apprehended as a skull, the anomalous blur disturbs the composition like a stain, and, as Chris Pye writes, 'asks the viewer to reverse the vectors of power intersecting the scene.'[175] Importantly, though the painting contains two perspectives, they are not presented in harmony like a diptych – the perspectives do not complement one another: the eye (and the reader) cannot reconcile them. As Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass succinctly note, 'it is literally impossible to hold the skull in focus at the same time as the other sitters and other objects'.[176] The viewer must abandon the privileged view, which has in any case been utterly destabilised, and apprehend the subordinated, subversive figure from a marginal position. This is precisely the form of hermeneutic reversal that *Open City* demands of its reader.

Like Holbein's ambassadors, Julius is initially seen from a privileged, cohesive perspective, but Moji's anamorphic counternarrative rends this view. On a diegetic level, Moji ruptures Julius's synthetic sense of identity; this ontological incursion splits and doubles the text into two opposing narratives, each of which can be traced to a different temporality. A clue to this temporal relationality occurs immediately before Julius encounters Moji for the first time since he left Nigeria:

> We experience life as a continuity, and only after it falls away, after it becomes the
> past, do we see its discontinuities. The past, if there is such a thing, is mostly empty
> space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float. Nigeria
> was like that for me: mostly forgotten, except for those few things that I remembered
> […] These were the things that had solidified in my mind by reiteration […] which,

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[175] Chris Pye, *The Vanishing: Shakespeare, the Subject, and Early Modern Culture* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 59.
[176] Anne Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 49.

taken as a group, represented the secure version of the past that I had been constructing since 1992. But there was another, irruptive sense of things past. The sudden reencounter, in the present, of something or someone long forgotten, some part of myself I had relegated to childhood and to Africa.[177]

Julius describes life in terms that Benjamin critiques, where the concept of progress inflects the perception of history so that time is experienced as a continuum for 'homogeneous, empty time'.[178] Julius experiences life in the past perfect continuous ('the secure version of the past that I had been constructing'), an unbroken action begun in 1992. Likewise, Julius's 'secure version of the past' is not an accumulation of experience over time, but an artificial 'construction' that occludes Africa and his youth. His meditation on the past proleptically alludes to his 'sudden reencounter, in the present' of an 'irruptive past'. The collision of these two narrative temporalities institutes an anamorphic torsion in which the dominant perspective is subverted by the figure it subordinates, constituting what Benjamin describes as a 'moment of danger'. I briefly referred to this moment in section 3, but it is worth returning to in order to describe the novel's dialectical mechanism.

Cole does not focalise his ethics through the narrator's redemptive gaze, allowing the reader to enact the restitution of history by proxy. The novel itself does not conclude with a sense of restored justice. Even when, in the final pages, Julius is absorbed in the sublime contemplation of the stars, his apprehension of the past is deferred: 'I felt in my body what my eyes could not grasp, which was that their true nature was the persisting visual echo of something that was already in the past.'[179] The one insight Julius does attain (which is foreshadowed by an earlier discussion with Farouq about Paul de Man) is a recognition of his blindness: '[m]y hands held metal, my eyes starlight, and it was as though I had come so close to something that it had fallen out of focus, or fallen so far away from it that it had faded away.'[180] Though he does not recognise it, the truth of the past has always been in front of him.

Freedman disagrees with Vermeulen's reading of the novel as a 'didactic call to social change': 'the novel has no such moral in tow.' Instead, she proposes a less political reading, and contends that 'the book is a defense of the non-motivated examination, the wandering

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[177] *OC*, pp. 155-156
[178] 'On the Concept', p. 395.
[179] *OC*, p. 256.
[180] Ibid., p. 257.

walk, the exploratory metaphor'.[181] According to Freedman, Julius 'does not celebrate cosmopolitanism so much as he inhabits its weak potential'; in this account, cosmopolitanism does not provide a political or ethical framework, but a purely visual frame but a 'liminal vantage point between inside and outside, for what Barthes might call "a subversion that is pensive".'[182] In a reading that may appear to fit the general framework of this thesis, Freedman further describes this 'weak potential' as 'a Benjaminian weak messianism that cannot save the past but can seize the memory of the past "for a world of new representations and alternative meanings."'[183] Yet, as I have already outlined, for these 'alternative representations' – that is, dialectical images – to 'flash up', the past *and* the present must be brought into relation; moreover, these images must be *read* by an active, engaged interpreter – a role that Julius falls seriously short of. He is unwilling to acknowledge his past even as he is highly attentive with the history of iniquity; and he avoids the irruption of that violent past into his present when Moji confronts him. It is not that there is no weak messianism in Cole's novel; but it is not located in Julius's 'non-motivated examination'. In section 4, I referred to the 'moment of danger' Benjamin describes in 'On the Concept of History', and it is worth returning to in order to describe the dialectical mechanism of the novel. He writes: 'Articulating the past historically […] means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger.'[184] It is a moment of danger because the image of the past is 'irretrievable'; and that image is irrietrievable because it 'threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognise itself in that image.'[185] It is worth making Ilit Ferber's distinction that the operative action here is 'recognising and not inventing or discovering' the past.[186] By 'intended', Benjamin means that the past addresses history and the present must recognise that address; put another way, history 'cites' the present, textually and juridically calling it to account. Julius is able to do this – up to the point where the 'line that connect[s]' him to his 'part in [the] story' erupts in a moment of danger: Moji's indictment of him. Julius does not hold this moment fast nor does he recognise it – that moment

[181] Freedman, p. 184.
[182] Ibid.
[183] David L. Eng and David Kazanjian qtd. in Freedman, p. 184.
[184] 'On the Concept', p. 391.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 112.

disappears from him 'irretrievably'. To paraphrase Kafka, another messianic thinker, there is hope, but not for Julius.

Conclusion

Towards a Theory of Messianic Reading

> 'Read what was never written,' runs a line in Hofmannsthal. The reader one should think of here is the true historian.'
>
> – Walter Benjamin, 'Paralipomena'[1]

A conclusion inheres finality and finitude: it marks the end, the completion of a work. For this study, which has been focused on incompletion – of works, of history, and of language – and survival – a conclusion presents a difficult task. For if a work is always taking leave of itself, simultaneously and interruptively departing and arriving, is it possible to speak of a conclusion? The conclusion of this thesis, then, must also be the afterlife of the study I have undertaken. It will be 'Janus-faced', as Scholem once described Benjamin, consolidating the key ideas and relationships identified in the preceding chapters, but also gesturing toward other, potential iterations these might take.[2]

The germ of this thesis began ten years ago when I first read *Reader's Block*. I wanted to identify why his late novels were so affective and startling when on the surface they were merely a collection of facts and anecdotes. This led me to contemplate the phrase 'matter of fact', which describes the unembellished tenor of his works and the 'material' that constitutes it. If facts and anecdotes were a kind of matter, then they attested to the presence, however attenuated and distant, of the past in the present. At the same time, I began to read *The Arcades Project*, which, as I have noted in Chapter 1, resembled Markson's novels in a remarkable way. Benjamin's work was rich, suggestive, and utterly elusive to my understanding. Howe has said that she regards 'some of his essays [as] poems.'[3] I read him for his literary value. I came to Howe much later, but I instantly recognised that her work performed the 'blasting' of the 'continuum of history' in its approach to the archive and in its formal qualities; it rediscovers the lost aura in material history and the 'afterlife of works'. Cole's novel was more discursive, but it, too, was strange. It was a response to Sebald's work, certainly – indeed it is also a Sebaldian afterlife – but it troubled his narrative model,

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[1] 'Paralipomena', *SW* 4, p. 390.
[2] Michael W. Jennings, et al (eds.), 'Chronology, 1927-1934', *SW* 2:2, p. 833.
[3] Howe, Keller interview, p. 29.

as I have outlined in Chapter 3.[4] It presented a critical 'moment of danger', an incursion of the past into the present that the narrator did not recognise, and it urged its readers to consider not only the residue of the distant past but to ask the question, '[w]hat does it mean when, in someone else's version, I am the villain?'[5] Each of these writers display a great sensitivity to the materiality and the material of history: David Markson's minimalist, fragmentary novels are the product of the author's compulsive collection of anecdotes and marginalia. In *The Nonconformist's Memorial,* Howe uncovers glitches in the archive – moments where orthodox histories and systems of classification break down as excesses that constitute the 'afterlife of works'. In *The Midnight,* Howe incorporates archival miscellany into her poetry, including ephemera inherited from her maternal family and invests the inexpressive artefacts with something that communicates beyond language. Teju Cole's novel, *Open City*, deploys the privileged figure of the flâneur to read the traces of colonial violence in New York's urban landscape, but also compels a reassessment of the flâneur's interpretive framework.

It is noteworthy that the three authors I examine in this study stand between modernism and postmodernism. Markson and Howe both grew up under the aegis of World War II, witnessed the rise of late modernism and its passing into postmodernity; their points of reference are modern, but their formal techniques are identifiably postmodern: fragmentation, intertextuality, referentiality. Cole belongs to a much younger generation, born fifteen years after the decolonisation of Nigeria (where he spent his childhood) and politicised by the so-called War on Terror. The critique of Sebald's narratology that I understand *Open City* to make situates Cole squarely within postmodernist literature's tendency to rework and subvert previous texts; yet his deployment of the flâneur links him to modernism. Moreover, Benjamin's work was addressed to the specific historical circumstances that marked and marred modernity. However, his reconceptualization of history and the notion of the afterlife challenges the idea that history and literature fit neatly into categorizable periods, or that there is ever a decisive 'break' with the past – as Benjamin instructs us, the past is always unfinished: the present is confronted with this fact every day.

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[4] Sebald would, of course, fit comfortably in this study. I have chosen to exclude Sebald from this project, however, because much has already been written on the crossing points between him and Benjamin, and because Cole's novel offers a much more interesting commentary on his work. See, for example, Lynn L. Wolff, *W.G. Sebald's Hybrid Poetics: Literature as Historiography* (Berlin; Boston, Mass.: De Gruyter, 2014); Dominik Finkelde, 'The Presence of the Baroque: Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* in Contemporary Contexts', *A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Rolf J. Goebel, pp. 46-69; Guy Hawkins, 'History in Things – Sebald and Benjamin on Transience and Detritus', *W.G. Sebald: Schreiben ex patria / Expatriate Writing*, ed. by Gerhard Fischer (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 161-176.

[5] *OC*, p. 243.

The word 'modern' is itself half a millennium old, yet it means 'person of the present time.' From this etymological definition we might extrapolate that 'we have *always* been modern' and that, as Benjamin claims, each moment of the past is a potential 'now' if it can be recognised. Following this definition, postmodernity (first coined in 1870) is a historical condition of being post-, or 'after', the 'present time'; or, as the old saying goes, at the end of history.[6] If this is the case, Benjamin's importance to contemporary thought continues to be vital.

This study has been '-after' Benjamin in a triple sense: it emerges after his arrival, 'following' him and 'like' him – I have sought to juxtapose his work with the contemporary writers who comprise the three chapters of this study in order to transform an understanding of both Benjamin's work and the literary works I have analysed in a sort of 'interlinear translation' that acknowledges the discrete formal and historical contexts from which each emerged but which also, I hope, cultivates new configurations of thought. As I outlined at the outset of this thesis, I do not argue that the works I have chosen to examine directly cite Benjamin – again, I do not seek to provide an account of literary influence – rather, I have 'in-cited' Benjamin in the works of others, placing his ideas in constellation with contemporary literature, and in the other dialectical direction, placed these works in constellation with his thought. In each chapter, I argue, an 'afterlife' of Benjamin's thought can be discerned: Markson's fragmentary, montage-like method of novel writing, generated, like *The Arcades Project*, from index cards; Howe's attentiveness to the materiality of history and of language; and Cole's anamorphic subversion of the flâneur. By the same turn, Markson, Howe, and Cole form a constellation of the different facets of *Nachleben*, or afterlife, a term which Benjamin characteristically left open and undefined. What these facets have revealed over the course of this thesis has been a poetics of 'messianic' reading that actualises the afterlife and modifies the past through remembrance.

I want to make these comparisons explicit by way of an anecdote. In July 2016, Susan Buck-Morss delivered a lecture at Birkbeck University's London Critical Theory Summer School, where, among many other marvellous insights, she discussed Benjamin's relationship with Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*.[7] Buck-Morss remarked that 'we cannot see the Klee image without the overlay of Benjamin's comments on it' in his moving but by now

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[6] Wolfgang Welsch and Mike Sandbothe, 'Postmodernity as a Philosophical Concept', *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. by Johannes Willem Bertens, Hans Bertens, Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1997), p. 75.
[7] Susan Buck-Morss, 'Benjamin in Ramallah', Lecture, Birkbeck University, 18 July 2016.

ubiquitous Thesis IX of 'On the Concept'. Buck-Morss then presented a slide of the image – with one striking difference: Klee's angel was on the screen, but superimposed on it was a portrait of Benjamin. It was uncanny: the merging of these two images was seamless; the angel's tousled curls blurred into Benjamin's, and its wide, enigmatic eyes suddenly took on the appearance of glasses. The point Buck-Morss was making, in a distinctly poetic and Benjaminian fashion, was that the Klee's angel and Benjamin's own image have been so cross-identified in their reception as to become indistinguishable. This brings me back to an issue I raised at the outset of this thesis. Benjamin's posthumous reception has enabled two fixed myths about his thought and his image as a thinker. On the one hand, he is the helpless angel, ineffectual – like the portraits drawn by Arendt, Adorno, and, more recently, Wurgaft. On the other hand, he is a melancholy angel, with his face turned toward the past, engaged in a nostalgic project of redeeming it, unwillingly blown into the future.

Thesis IX, which is centred around the angel's visual orientation, presents us with the problem of *regarding* history: do we look at it simply as 'one single catastrophe'?[8] This is the vision of history that many take away from Benjamin's work, and it is one I have been at pains to avoid in this thesis. To put it bluntly, it would have been far easier to analyse the texts that form the foundation of this study as bearing melancholy witness to the full-scale devastation of history, piling up the wreckage and mimetically, traumatically, representing the ruins that lay at the site of disaster that is Western civilisation. I wanted to examine the work of Markson, Howe, and Cole and the secret histories they inventoried in a way that did not affirm the so-called 'winners' of history, but directed its gaze toward what survives and, importantly, survivors. This was of particular import in my analysis of Cole's *Open City*. It may appear that an examination of the concept of the afterlife would entail a traumatic model of history. While I have used psychoanalytic criticism to analyse certain aspects of the works in this study and have found Melanie Klein's theory of object relations fruitful in conjunction with my discussion of Howe's allegorical elegy for her mother in *The Midnight* I am doubtful about its world-historical application.

The traumatic model of history is a model of eternal recurrence in which the catastrophe repeats itself again and again. Within this framework, history itself is traumatised, acting out a repetition compulsion whereby it continually inflicts disaster on the world. The transposition of trauma from the individual to history is problematic. An example

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[8] 'On the Concept', p. 392.

relevant to my discussion of *Open City* would be the proposition that the Iraq War was a response to the trauma inflicted on the American body politic. In Chapter 3, I drew on Lucy Bond's criticism of responses to 9/11 that appropriated Holocaust memory as a 'screen memory' for the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in order 'to preclude recognition of America's historical shortcomings.'[9] The model of history Benjamin provides us with is one which relentlessly insists on recognition and critique. If we apply this psychoanalytic paradigm to history *itself*, it is 'difficult', as Greg Forter writes, 'to imagine how we might *stop* transmitting historical trauma.'[10] This paradigm supposes that trauma and history are interchangeable terms in a way that appropriates, universalises, and, importantly, dehistoricises collective historical traumas.[11]

Benjamin, who stood at the epicentre of disaster and did not survive it, offers us a way of reading history that does not equate it with catastrophe (his *Habilitation* on baroque drama is precisely directed against this impulse); nor does it suppose an absolute recovery of history that would occlude the ethically imperative task of remembering the dead or acknowledging past and present suffering. In the final analysis, Thesis IX is not a model for viewing history, it is a warning: the storm that prevents the angel from closing his wings and intervening in history is 'the storm of *progress*.'[12] In one of the finer exegeses of this passage, which has been subject to countless interpretations, Andrew Benjamin writes:

> 'Progress' is linked therefore to an inability to intervene both within what is occurring and equally within what has occurred. To which it should be added that progress couldn't remember. (Remembrance is destructive.) This needs to be linked

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[9] Bond, 'Types of Transculturality: Narrative Frameworks and the Commemoration of 9/11', *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders*, ed. by Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), pp. 61-82 (p. 89).

[10] Greg Forter, *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 135. Ironically, the writing of this thesis has been, for this scholar, the psychoanalytic 'working through' of a tendency to interpret the past and even more so the present, as 'one single catastrophe'.

[11] The model I am thinking of here is delineated by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; repr 2016). Ruth Leys makes similar criticisms of Caruth's model in *Trauma, a Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[12] 'There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.' 'On the Concept', p. 392. Original emphases.

to the angel's inability to act. That inability comes to define the angel […] He is subject to progress and as such becomes progress's subject.[13]

The angel is not, therefore, an exemplar of either a critical or an ethical historical perspective. Regarding history as either 'a chain of events' or 'a single catastrophe' are two sides of the same coin; they are interposed like Buck-Morss's lecture slide. But, given the history of modernity and its continued projection into the present, what is the alternative? The intervention the angel wishes to make is that of total reparation: he 'would like to […] awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.'[14] This, too, is an impossibility.

Benjamin's philosophy is an effort to conceive of history otherwise: to abandon the notion that it is an inexorable chain of progress, or an unending catastrophe, or as the waiting room of redemption. All three positions are forbidden to an authentic engagement with history and the politics of time. If events proceed sequentially – one thing leads to another – then the current state of affairs appears as predetermined, and any number of abuses, injustices, and atrocities can be justified; future possibilities (indeed, the very possibility of the future) are thus foreclosed. If the future is defined as that which is yet-to-come, the bearer of possibility, then 'homogeneous, empty time' is a temporality in which there is no future. This is why Benjamin calls it 'empty'. The eschatological vision of a fulfilled, completed history is also problematic: if the completion of history – that is, the end of history and the end of the catastrophe identified with it – is always held in abeyance, then no intervention must be made, no action taken other than waiting for the arrival of the Messiah.

Catastrophe and redemption dominate Benjamin's writings, but they are placed in a dialectic that delimits their totality and yields an alternative approach to history that neither erases past injustices nor forecloses hope for the future: *weak* messianism, which has been the undercurrent of this thesis. While the messianic is frequently mentioned in the wealth of critical writing on Benjamin, and its interpretation is the subject of much debate, I understand the 'weak messianic power' with which "we have [all] been endowed' as the capacity to *read* in such a way as to interrupt history and alter its meaning.[15] In *The Messianic Now: Philosophy, Religion Culture*, Eric Jacobson writes, '[w]here would one begin to locate the

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[13] Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy*, pp. 184-185.
[14] 'On the Concept', p. 392.
[15] Ibid., p. 390.

messianic?'[16] Benjamin does not give us an answer to this, but his references to the messianic are always framed in terms of language, writing, and textuality:

> If one looks upon history as a text, then one can say of it what a recent author has said of literary texts – namely, that the past has left in them images comparable to those registered by a light-sensitive plate. 'The future alone possesses developers strong enough to reveal the image in all its details. Many pages in Marivaux or Rousseau contain a mysterious meaning which the first readers of these texts could not fully have deciphered. […] The historical method is a philological method based on the book of life. 'Read what was never written,' runs a line in Hofmannsthal. The reader one should think of here is the true historian.[17]

This brings me to the epigraph quoted at the beginning of this study, where Benjamin asserts that historical understanding can only be 'grasped […] as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the "afterlife of works" […] is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general.'[18] The 'afterlife of works', and with it 'historical understanding', can only be constituted through an act of critical 'messianic' reading whose injunction is to 'read what was never written'. A text can be cited, criticised, rewritten, annotated, and translated. Reading always alters the text that is read; and each reading generates *other* readings, each of which are singular and unrepeatable – it actualises the afterlife of a work, and of the work of history. If history is conceived of as a text, it is not fixed to its origin – it can be read, to borrow a phrase from Howe, 'out of the bounds of its bound margin.'[19]

By now it should be evident that Benjamin is speaking of reading in messianic terms. Now, if reading is thought of in terms of the messianic (not messianism – I will distinguish between these two terms shortly) I want to look at how Benjamin formulates the messianic in Thesis V:

> [t]he past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. Doesn't a breath of air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear,

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[16] Eric Jacobson, 'Locating the Messianic: In Search of Causation and Benjamin's Last Message', *The Messianic Now: Philosophy, Religion, Culture*, ed. by Arthur Bradley and Paul Fletcher (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 27-44 (p. 29).
[17] 'Paralipomena', p. 405.
[18] *AP*, [N2,3], p. 461.
[19] Howe, 'MM', *NM*, p. 92.

isn't there an echo of now silent ones? […] If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. […] Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim.[20]

As I have just remarked, Benjamin speaks of reading in messianic terms: '[i]f we look upon history as a text'; 'the past has left in them images […] that the future alone' can 'develop'; and 'the historical method is a philological method based on the book of life.'[21] But, as Thesis V demonstrates, Benjamin also frames the messianic in terms of reading: 'the past carries with it a secret *index* by which it is referred to redemption'; and, in Thesis III, 'only for a redeemed mankind is history *citable* in all its moments.'[22]

The weak messianic power that Benjamin speaks of in his thesis, I want to suggest, is something that is figured specifically in the text. The mutual relationship between reading as the messianic and the messianic as reading is delineated in these two quotations. Taken together, they advance what I have been referring to as a poetics of reading that is articulated in terms of textuality, legibility, readability, citability, indexicability, translatability and referentiality. I say citability rather than citation, index, and so on in accordance with Benjamin's 'tendency to formulate […] his concepts by nominalizing verbs, not in the usual manner but by adding the suffix -barkeit (which in English can be written either -ibility or -ability)', which, as Weber points out in his brilliant study of this suffix, emphasises 'a possibility or a potentiality, to a capacity rather than to an actually existing reality.'[23] Although I have discussed the term at different points throughout this thesis, it is necessary to make further the distinction between messianism and 'weak messianic power', since it is the latter that designates an ethical intervention between apathy and eschatology. As I have noted in Chapter 1, pure messianism is the cessation of history and time, the arrival of the Last Judgement where temporality is replaced by the law. The weak messianic power that 'we' are all 'endowed with' also belongs to an interruptive temporality, wherein 'the past' is 'seized […] as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability.'[24] It marks an intervention into 'homogeneous, empty time', but not an apocalyptic closure. The distinguishing feature of weak messianic power is that it holds *open* the 'narrow gate' of

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[20] 'On the Concept', p. 390. My emphases.
[21] 'Paralipomena', p. 405.
[22] 'On the Concept', p. 390.
[23] Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 1-4, p. 116.
[24] 'On the Concept', p. 390.

possibility for the present to recognise and remember, that is to say, *read*, an image of the past. But it is 'weak' because it is not an eventuality: it requires that 'we' make this intervention by actualising these potentialities or, as Weber puts it, '-abilities'.

Read together, Benjamin, Markson, Howe, and Cole form a field of related 'weak' messianic projects that move away from the identification of history as catastrophe and, equally, from notions of transcendent recovery that, at the close of this thesis, I want to identify as a 'poetics of reading'. Though Benjamin provides the philosophical grounds for this poetics, it is a project that Markson, Howe, and Cole share with one another through their varied articulations of afterlife. Each present three figures of the 'after': Markson's 'late style' emphasises the afterlife's link to mortality, writing 'after' a life that is now at its end; Howe's poetry performs the archival pursuit of the afterlife in works, 'following' dead voices and reconstituting them in her poems in an altered but renewed form; Cole's novel suggests a different sense of 'after': his narrator, too, searches for images of the past that have been deposited in the present. But he is also 'followed after' by his own past, and the question of his recognition of the afterlife of his own violence is at the heart of the novel.

In Chapter 1, I describe how Markson presents a series of facts and anecdote focused on the decline and decay of works of art and the mortality human life *and* of its works, in a highly fragmented and disarticulated form. At first glance, the unremitting references to death and disintegration appear to suggest a wholly pessimistic and mournful approach to history. In an essay on *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, David Foster Wallace writes that Markson 'has made facts sad.' But these dismal fragments are interspersed with ones which testify to the miracle of survival; for example, the unearthing of the Laocöon in a sixteenth-century vineyard or the existence, however fragmented, of Sappho's poems, despite the numerous edicts issued to destroy them. Everything that survives does so by chance; it is this contingency that ensures that there is 'the possibility […] at every moment for what *is* to be *other than it is.*'[25] As I have tried to suggest in the first chapter of this study, 'the afterlife of works' is produced through a dialectical interplay between destruction and survival, what I call the 'dialectic of the fragment'. I have also been emphatic that the afterlife is not eternal, but transient. Benjamin's description of translation as an afterlife is instructive here: 'For in its afterlife – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change.' The afterlife of a work (and of history)

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[25] Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 146. Original emphases.

is thus not a given – it is not acquired through the passage of time. Rather, a work has the *potential* to acquire an afterlife, but in order for it to live 'after' its initial 'life' it must be actualised in the present. '*If* we look upon history as a text': Benjamin's formulation is conditional, it suggests the *possibility* of regarding history as a text – then the afterlife of this text can only be actualised through the act of reading. And if history can be read, and acquire an afterlife, then history can be viewed from the point of the survivor rather than the victor. It not only re-orders our relation to time, but also reconfigures our conceptual perspective on history. It is a perspective wholly unlike the gaze of Benjamin's angel that I discussed earlier, which is fixed on history as 'one single catastrophe.'

If Markson's work reveals the contours of the afterlife, Howe's work situates it within an explicitly ethical frame. Howe's poetic project is distinctly messianic. In *Europe of Trusts* Howe writes, 'I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate.'[26] As Mandy Bloomfield writes, 'it is important to note […] that her cautious "I wish" articulates both an impulse to recover effaced aspects of the past and a recognition of the opacity and inaccessibility of histories consigned to "the dark side."'[27] This wish has a weak messianic power. In Chapter 2, I note that Howe, like Benjamin, wants to separate from the form of historical transmission that is 'tainted' by barbarism without, however, giving up the documents or archives completely. One mode of transmission that eludes and betrays the strictures and structure of the archive is textual ephemera, particularly marginalia, which she 'tenderly lift[s]' from the margins and repositions them to the centre of her texts: '[n]ames who are strangers out of bounds of the bound margin: I thought one way to write about a loved author would be to follow what trails he follows through the words of others: what if these pencilled single double and triple scorings arrows short phrases angry outbursts crosses cryptic ciphers sudden enthusiasms mysterious erasures have come to find you too, here again, now.'[28] Here, Howe's rhetoric suggests a temporality of afterlife through multiple paths of 'following'. Melville is behind her, in the past, and in front of her, in the archive – Howe also follows his 'following' of 'the words of others'. But this is not a wholly retrogressive journey: the marks on the page 'have come to find you too, here again, now' – the past comes 'after' Howe. If Benjamin violently 'wrenches' historical content from its context, Howe bases her poetic historiography on

[26] Howe, *Europe of Trusts*, p. 14.
[27] Mandy Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics: Word, Image, History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016), p. 38.
[28] 'Melville's Marginalia', *NM*, p. 100.

'feminine' needlework practices such as cutwork and patchwork; and if Markson's work suggests the capacity for history in and as a text to become legible and therefore readable in its afterlife, Howe's work actualises these potentials and narrates the seizure of images of the past as they 'flash up'. Howe's poetry restores silenced, 'inarticulate' histories but preserves their brokenness through gaps, stuttering, and other non-communicative modes of 'expression'.

Cole's novel places an entirely different emphasis on reading (and) the afterlife of works. In his intensely and multivalently visual work, it is exceedingly evident that Cole is an art historian and a photographer as well as a writer. It reminds us that, in Benjamin's 'Paralipomena', the text he speaks of is not limited to script: an image is also a text. Of course, discursive texts – like those of Marivaux and Rousseau – contain images. But Cole's novel draws attention to the fact that Benjamin writes of '*looking* upon history' as a text. Benjamin's metaphor of historical understanding as a photographic plate is instructive in understanding Cole's articulation of the afterlife and Julius's failure to 'develop', or read, his own past. Throughout much of the novel, Julius appears to be the consummate flâneur, intent on reading the 'still legible' traces of colonial and racial violence in the city as 'generations [rush] through the eye of the needle'. But as I claim in Chapter 3, the construction of the protagonist as a twenty-first century flâneur, and the novel's initial appearance as belonging to the sub-genres of the cosmopolitan, post-9/11, and 'Sebaldian' novel are tricks of the eye. When Julius is confronted with his own act of violence, he elides it completely and turns toward the more distant past, to anecdotes from ancient Rome, to Nietzsche, to Mahler – to a time before the 'after' of his actions. It begs the question: is history any longer 'legible' in the sense Benjamin intended? Can close attention to sites of memory and historical injustice be used to screen other forms of violence? The answer, I think, is yes and no. What I believe Cole's novel contributes to a Benjaminian understanding of history is the necessity of making our own implication and complicity in historical violence legible, of reading these legibilities before they become faint traces. Cole's novel reminds us how weak messianic power truly is. The potential to read the afterlife is not always enacted. But while his narrator does not recognise his past in the 'moment of danger', the 'critical moment on which all reading is founded', there is hope that the readers of this novel will. Through its anamorphic structure, *Open City* declares the urgency to developing a new angle of vision and come to recognise what we did not, at first glance, see. It calls for a radical reorienting of our interpretive assumptions.

This project began as a comparative reading of Benjamin's philosophy of history and contemporary literature and the different modalities of afterlife they articulated, but it has raised complicated new questions surrounding the ethics of form and aesthetics. Whether ethics can be 'aestheticised' is an open question, but it is clear that there is a vital relation between ethics and aesthetics, since reading is a fundamental way of extending one's subjectivity outward and relating to the other. Aesthetics is not *sui generis* ethical – far from it, as fascist movements past and present have demonstrated, but this fact alone makes aesthetics an ethical priority. Benjamin was uniquely aware of this, and his philosophy of history was devoted to making an ethical discourse around aesthetics and historical representation imaginable. For this discourse to be thought – for it to have an afterlife – we must read Benjamin in the present, but most of all, we must read what was never written.

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