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Historical Citation and Revolutionary Epistemology
The Image/Word Distinction in Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project

Alison Ross
Monash University
alison.ross@monash.edu

Abstract

This article defends the thesis that there are multiple points of exchange between the categories of "word" and "image" in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. Benjamin describes the truth of the articulate wish of the past as "graphically perceptible" and the image as "readable." In this respect the vocabulary of "word" and "image" that Benjamin's early work had opposed are not just deployed in concert, but specific features of the vocabulary of "word" and "image" become exchangeable. The distinctive features of this exchange can be used to expound on Benjamin's peculiar understanding of revolutionary experience and the significance of the break that it marks with his early way of opposing the word and the image. In particular, the exchange of features between word and image can explain the mechanics and intended effect of his idea that the meaning of history can be perceived in an image. The study of this exchange also shows that although the framework of "graphic perception" entails an experience of motivating meaning that is epistemologically grounded, the citation model of history is unable to secure the extension of the sought after legibility of the nineteenth century to a recipient.

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To write history means giving dates their physiognomy
    WALTER BENJAMIN, *Arcades Project*

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In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin uses the terms "word" and "image" as if the manner in which they functioned and the meanings they held were interchangeable. Hence the frequent references he makes to "reading," "perception" and "legibility" to communicate the historical significance of the nineteenth-century arcades. This terminology seems to draw equally on the vivid experience of meaning suggested by the concept of the "image," and on the virtue of historical truth that accrues to this experience on account of the fact that it occurs in language. For example, in reference to his aspiration to make history "graphically perceptible," Benjamin writes that what is "read" in his *Arcades* is the "nineteenth century." "We open the book of what happened."[1] The position marks a significant departure from the premises of Benjamin's early work.

In Benjamin's early writing the word is paired to the clarity of articulate language, and opposed to the image. The latter is depicted as a sensuous form, which, when it is presumed to communicate vital meaning, induces guilt and anxiety in its hapless interpreter. As a sensuous form, the image only communicates irreducibly ambiguous meaning. As such, the image is opposed to the eminently cognitive capacity that Benjamin attaches to the clarity of the word. The negative features of the image, and the integrity of the "word" – "image" dichotomy that supports it are seemingly abandoned in Benjamin's later writing when the image is described as "dialectical" and credited with epistemological significance for the cause of revolutionary politics. The way Benjamin explains his conception of "historical citation" and the idea of the "dialectical image" in his late work can illuminate the consequences of this shift.

The historical citation wrenches the "historical object" from its context and constructs it as something "legible to all."[2] The putatively universal quality of legibility refers specifically to the truth status the historical object acquires in citation, which contrasts with the procedure of traditional historical narration.

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1 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 464 [N4, 2].

2 Ibid., 476 [N11, 3].

Traditional history "simply" picks "out an object from [...] continuous succession." In contrast, Benjamin argues, "[m]aterialist historiography does not choose its objects arbitrarily. It does not fasten on them but rather springs them loose from the order of succession. Its provisions are more extensive, its occurrences more essential."[3] In the *Arcades* the object constructed in citation is stripped of its place in the "order of succession." This means that in citation the object no longer has the quality of belonging to the past. The existential claim made by citation echoes Benjamin's earlier description of the effect of quotation in *One Way Street*: "Quotations in my work are like wayside robbers who leap out, armed, and relieve the idle stroller of his conviction."[4] Citation makes an imperative and binding claim on the reader in the present.

A similar vocabulary is used for the dialectical image: this "genuinely historical image," which is "identical with the historical object" marks out "the arrest of thoughts" that the cited object occasions. "Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears."[5] Although the reference to an "arrest" and a "standstill" of thoughts signals that the core of the dialectical image is the immediate experience [in the cited object] of historical tensions, Benjamin also describes this "genuinely historical image" in terms that call on the modality and temporality of the citation. He writes that the experience of the image occurs in language[6] and that it only becomes "legible" "at a particular time."[7] Put this way, the homology between the two concepts and the evident disregard it shows for Benjamin's earlier dichotomy of word and image is striking. Against his earlier view that the non-discursive, sensuous form of the image propagates demonic, ambiguous meaning, the *Arcades* contends that historical truth is disclosed in the experience of citation *and* image, and it is the experience of this truth that "justifies" the "violent expulsion" of the object "from the continuum of historical process."[8] The citation and the dialectical image stage an object for the existential experience that alone can make the revolutionary stakes of history "recognisable," that is to say, these stakes become a meaningful prompt for the action of historical agents. In each case the context in which this vital experience of meaning occurs is language.

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3   Ibid., 475 [N10a, 1].

4   W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, ed. M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 1996), 481.

5   Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 475 [N10a, 3].

6   Ibid., 462 [N2a, 3].

7   Ibid., 462 [N3, 1].

8   Ibid., 475 [N10a, 3].

In this article I would like to specify the terms of the exchange between the features of the word and the image that occur in the *Arcades Project*. In particular, I would like to consider this exchange in relation to the question that, although not phrased in these terms by Benjamin, goes to the heart of the cogency of his Project: namely, how it is that the perception of material forms is able to generate existentially binding meaning. I will examine this question in relation to the changing definition of word and image in Benjamin's writing, whose pertinence as a frame for understanding his conception of revolutionary experience, I will argue, has been overlooked in scholarship on the *Arcades*.

Beyond the study of Benjamin, this topic furnishes a critical perspective on "the aesthetic dimension of science" and the appeal to an aesthetics of scale in certain contemporary historiographical projects. The ephemera Benjamin gathers together in his *Arcades* aims to bypass the otiose mediation of revolutionary doctrine. The scale of the project is deliberately restricted to the detritus of the nineteenth century, which follows from Benjamin's notion that historical truth resides not ubiquitously, but at points of extremity. In these respects Benjamin's project does not possess the features that qualify recent movements like "Big History" as "aesthetic" projects, "aesthetic" understood here in the non-philosophical and degraded sense of a pithy and seamless mode of communication of matters of scientific and narrative complexity.[9] Further, his project stands opposed to the inelegant and arbitrary bundling together of science and narrative that animates such projects; for Benjamin, as we will see, the narrative genre of "the story" degrades across historical time and is therefore unable to serve a unifying function. Similarly, one of the ghosts driving his conception of materialist history is the aspiration of nineteenth-century positivist historians to capture the past as it "really was." Benjamin describes this aspiration as "the strongest narcotic of the century."[10] The point of the ephemera he gathers is not just that of an anti-aesthetic focus on decay. The type of knowledge it provides is pointedly opposed to the presumption that knowledge of an historical totality could be imparted in a carefully chosen

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9   See I. Hesketh "The Story of Big History," *History of the Present*, 4, no. 2 (2014), 171–202, 174, 182 for an explanation of this definition of "aesthetic." Hesketh draws attention to the strategic use of reverse time-lapse images like the unscrambling of an egg to communicate the complexity and order that Big History looks for in the past, 172–3. Such tactics re-shape in anthropocentric ways an un-surveyable mass of scientific data, whose real import would undermine the unqualified presumption of History as the "epic story" of "humanity." Cf. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 474 [N9a, 6]: "Historical materialism must renounce the epic element in history. It […] explodes the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins – that is, with the present."

10   Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 463 [N3, 4].

discursive device. Benjamin gathers together the ruined commodities of the nineteenth century because these uniquely show the tyranny that the aesthetic drive for the seamless and the whole exercises over the putatively insignificant details, which he wishes to rescue, of historical suffering and decay. Whether such an aesthetic drive manifests itself as an encompassing narrative of history or the clumsy combination of such a narrative with selectively deployed scientific "facts," the point of Benjamin's project is to cut down what he regards as the construction of such false totalities. The project is explicitly anti-aesthetic.

At the same time, however, that the specifics of Benjamin's position provide a critical vantage on the recent revival of the combination of traditional narrative and scientific history in Big History, any attempt to call on history for the purpose of instilling motivation, as Benjamin does, remains fraught with contradictions and vulnerable to dependence on the tactics of an aestheticization of scale. The scale of the information that is arrayed clashes with the devices drawn on to shape it. As we will see, despite his idea that "writing history" involves giving dates "their physiognomy," these devices are not aesthetic in any straightforward sense of the term.[11] It is historical knowledge that performs the reduction of scale required for the experience of the meaning of history.[12] In Benjamin's case the theological structure of knowledge in his late revolutionary project founders without the theological security of a God surrogate. Purveyors of the long view who hope that nature writ large might provide such a surrogate function will no doubt encounter similar dilemmas; the structure of knowledge on offer is no less theological for its putatively scientific bases.

The paper considers four main topics: the treatment of the image in scholarship on the *Arcades*; Benjamin's early opposition of word and image; important instances in which the meaning and functions of word and image in the *Arcades* become interchangeable; and finally, the conceptual difficulties that arise in the transition from the early to the late work. My main point will be that Benjamin's *Arcades* exchanges the role and meaning of "word" and "image" in respect to their position in his early writing. This mechanism of exchange is the way he secures epistemological probity for his conception of revolutionary experience. The components of this position are obtuse to scholarship that does not take into consideration the significant shifts across Benjamin's corpus on the topic of the image.

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11   Ibid., 476 [N11, 2].

12   On the notion of scale in history see ibid., 468 [N6, 5].

I   Scholarship on the *Arcades Project*

Benjamin worked on his *Arcades Project* from 1927 up with his death in 1940. Alongside material on the iron and glass construction of the Paris arcades Benjamin places citations about distinctive "types" of modern conduct or experience such as the flâneur and the dandy, the gambler, the prostitute, and the collector, with information on topics of past social history, such as the arrangement of things in domestic interiors, department stores, panoramas, and the arcades. His plan to assemble the materials for a new kind of "history" that would be "citable in *all* its moments" intends that we relate to these moments as "legible" or "readable" images.[13] In his late writing on history he specifies that the comprehensive nature of the relation to the past is governed by the concept of redemption, which holds that "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history."[14] Hence the idea that history per se is "legible" gives the term citation a more expansive register of meaning than the restricted reference to techniques used to record and communicate instances of the past. He claims that "to write history [...] means to cite history."[15] The idea of developing "to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks" reflects the aspiration of the Project to directly convey the meaning of history.[16]

The stated intention of the *Arcades Project* is to make history "graphically perceptible."[17] On Benjamin's conception, only the perceptibility of compelling historical meaning motivates revolutionary action in the present. This is because the meaning that is communicated in "graphic perception" is not just vital but existentially significant. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the concrete historical objects or figures referred to in the book make the ground of historical meaning perceptible and actionable on their own. The

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13   The quoted phrase is from Benjamin's theses "On the Concept of History," W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 4 1938–1940*, trans. E. Jephcott et al., ed. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 394, emphasis added: "The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Of course only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a citation à l'ordre du jour. And that day is Judgment Day."

14   Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 394.

15   Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 476 [N11, 3].

16   Ibid., 458 [N1, 10].

17   Ibid., 460 [N1a, 6].

very "project" of the *Arcades* disproves such an assertion. The conception of the citation as the construction of the historical object, and the idea of the dialectical image as the experience in the cited object of historical tensions specifically count against such a thesis. Accordingly, the content of the folders that deal with the technical achievement of the steel and glass construction of the Paris arcades are about more than the arcades as historical forms of architecture. Similarly, neither those folders devoted to the specific forms of life from the nineteenth century (such as the gambler, the flâneur and the prostitute), nor even the dossiers that treat the articles of prosaic life that are displayed in the nineteenth-century arcades as commodities are able to perform the feat of perceptibility on account of merely being material forms or images.

The "graphic perception" of history is an experience of the "readability" of history that is dependent on a number of factors. The materialist historian cites history in such a way that the meaning of the historical object is "legible." Its "readability" or "legibility" refers specifically to the grasping of the lost wishes of the past that Benjamin thinks motivate revolutionary action. It is not raw historical data that is at issue in materialist history, but the historical images that bear "the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded."[18] This critical moment is "perilous" because it is the moment at which "the status quo threatens to be preserved."[19] Benjamin's definition of catastrophe accentuates the weight given to such activities of "reading." "Catastrophe: – to have missed the opportunity."[20]

A material form alone is unable to communicate such historically vital meaning. Instead Benjamin holds that historical images are constructed in citation, and that what is encountered in the citation is "authentic historical time, the time of truth."[21] The point is crucial. For raw historical data to become legible and actionable it must first be "rescued" in "historical knowledge."[22] The work deploys a battery of concepts to develop this point, including the idea that the nineteenth century has an historical index which points forward to its redemption in the twentieth century. It is the "specific critical point" of this index, and the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries constellation it requires, that makes nineteenth-century wishes and dreams legible and actionable in the present.[23] The historical tensions embodied in the Paris arcades are thus

18   Ibid., 463 [N3, 1].
19   Ibid., 474 [N10, 2].
20   Ibid., 474 [N10, 2].
21   Ibid., 463 [N3, 1].
22   Ibid., 476 [N11, 4].
23   Ibid., 463 [N3, 1].

rendered legible to all, and the frustrated wishes involved in its construction become actionable, because in its materialist presentation the historical truth of the arcades is grasped and experienced. Hence the convergence of the terminology of the "image" and the "word" in the *Arcades Project* seems to be an artefact of Benjamin's aim to make historical truth (the word) experience-able (the image) and thus binding.

However, Benjamin's attempt to involve knowledge and language (the "word") in the experience of an image does not really answer the question of how it is that the image communicates existentially binding meaning. Rather, the involvement of knowledge and language is his attempt to establish the idea that an image has the probity to communicate certainty and truth. As such, these specifications address the difficulty internal to the shift in Benjamin's corpus from his earlier condemnation of the image on the grounds that the meaning it expressed was irremediably ambiguous to his later endorsement of its motivational capacity. The scholarship in the field largely sidesteps the question of how an image communicates vital meaning, in favour of the presumption that it does so. And it thereby overlooks how changes in the word-image relationship in Benjamin's thought are relevant for explaining Benjamin's very insistence on the idea that the historical image communicates revolutionary meaning.

Generally, the literature on the *Arcades Project* puts forward a naïve understanding of the place of the image in Benjamin's historiography, as if the terms of its articulation there were somehow seamlessly continuous with his earliest writings. It tends to be fruitless tasks, such as adjudicating between the preponderance of Marxist or theological elements in the Project, despite the evidently eccentric relation Benjamin has to each tradition, which occupies the critics' attention. In its preoccupation with such issues, the literature thus skirts over the factors that direct the shape of Benjamin's thesis of historical perception, including, not least, the epistemological claim at the basis of his conception of revolution and the significance of language for his definition of the dialectical image.

In correspondence on the draft material for the project, Theodor Adorno complained that the approach Benjamin took lacked "theoretical mediation."[24] Benjamin took the posture, according to Adorno, of a "wide-eyed presentation of facticity."[25] Arendt considered that she was defending Benjamin against this charge when she wrote that the complaint "hit the nail right on its head:

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24   Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, 99.

25   Ibid., 107.

that is what Benjamin was doing and wanted to do."[26] The terms of Arendt's interpretation in which Benjamin defined the image as a material form that also functioned as an idea is shared in the exegeses of the *Arcades* in work by Pierre Missac and Susan Buck-Morss. The theoretical mediation that Adorno had claimed was lacking is, in the view of these authors, incorporated into the image by virtue of its status as a medium that articulates ideas or meaning.[27] The difficulty these established interpretations of Benjamin face is that the conception of the image as a material form that communicates meaning is criticised by him in his early work. In "Goethe's Elective Affinities" he chides the perception of vital meaning in the image as a demonic fostering of anxiety and guilt precisely because the meaning the material form of the image communicates is not clear.[28] It cannot be clear, in the terms of his early writing, because the materiality of the image is not articulate. The absence of language is also an absence of knowledge.[29]

Jacques Rancière argues not that theoretical mediation of the image is lacking, but that the theoretical scene described in Benjamin's *Arcades* is one that stymies revolutionary energy. This effect, Rancière posits, follows from Benjamin's inadequate attention to words in favour of things.[30] Thus the presumption that the image rather than the word is the relevant frame for Benjamin's conception of historical meaning is also made here. The argument holds that Benjamin's attention to the old commodity forms and architecture of the arcades is his way of burying the promise of emancipation in mute artefacts. The tactic entombs revolutionary purity. As a feature of "things" rather than "words" the revolution loses attainability, but gains integrity. According to Rancière, the effect of the *Arcades Project* is not just to turn our attention away from the factory in which commodities are made but also from attending to the words of the historical agents who make them. Rancière replaces Benjamin's purist excesses with an archival history that uncovers the articulated views of historical agents. Unlike Benjamin, Rancière embraces the functions of the story form as a mode of re-telling the past. For Rancière this

26   H. Arendt, "Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940," in W. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. H. Zohn, ed. H. Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 1–59, 11.

27   P. Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. S. W. Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995) 109–110; S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) 54–6; and Arendt, "Walter Benjamin," 12.

28   Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 306–7.

29   Ibid., 326.

30   J. Rancière, "The Archaeomodern Turn," in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. M. P. Steinberg (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 24–41.

approach energises contemporary emancipatory projects and, in Benjaminian style, unlocks the closure of history from the concept of "the past."[31] Whatever the merits of Rancière's archival project, the assumption that Benjamin's historical project is absorbed with mute things overlooks the kinds of technicalities entailed in Benjamin's theory of historical citation in the *Arcades*. The oversight stems from an insufficiently critical conception of the status of the image in that work and the way it collaborates with aspects of Benjamin's early account of the "word."

None of this literature addresses the problems that Benjamin's early work presents for the thesis that he had a wide-eyed fascination with actualities, although each position (whether critical or approving) presupposes it. Neither, then, is this scholarship able to offer an adequate defence for Benjamin's change of tack in which the conception of knowledge that had excluded the image now includes it. In this regard, it is striking that the literature on the *Arcades* largely ignores the implications of Benjamin's response to Adorno's accusation: Benjamin draws Adorno's attention to the early critique he had made of philological criticism in his 1924/5 essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. He notes that this early essay echoes Adorno's concern about the naïve captivation with sensuous forms. Benjamin's letter pleads that he would not now revert to the position he had excoriated.[32] This must mean that the rehabilitation of the image that Benjamin's *Arcades* undertakes removes from it the features of lack of clarity and ambiguity that had warranted its earlier condemnation. The question to ask is how his later positive use of the image manages this transition.

Finally, it is important to mention the scholarship that identifies in Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image a hybrid creature between word and image. Such scholarship is attentive to the epistemological ambitions of the *Project*. It is often absorbed by philosophical questions, such as the differences between "saying" and "showing" (Eli Freidlander); or, how to determine when historical meaning is true rather than the opinion of an interpreter (Max Pensky). Although this scholarship aims to treat the question of the relation between the image and language, it ignores the diverse factors internal to Benjamin's corpus that shape this relationship. Pensky's position that the meaning Benjamin attaches to his material is ultimately arbitrary

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31   J. Rancière, *The Names of History*, trans. H. Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 15.

32   Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 107.

focuses on the aesthetic heritage of the montage technique used in citation.[33] The argument does not take into account the specifically anti-aesthetic heritage of the idea of the dialectical image, which derives from Benjamin's early conception of the demonic image as aesthetic. Benjamin structures the terms of the exchange between word and image in the *Arcades* on the basis of this early suspicion of aesthetic semblance. He does so, as we will see, precisely to avoid the pitfalls of arbitrary attributions of meaning to sensuous forms. On the other hand, Friedlander rightly identifies the epistemological agenda driving Benjamin's insistence that the dialectical image occurs in language, but he doesn't mention the revolutionary agenda of the work.[34] The attempt to square truth with language and image arguably misses the intended point of their relation. Friedlander argues that Benjamin wanted the recipient of the image to have an experience of intention-less truth.[35] This experience of truth, however, is intended by Benjamin to provide its recipient with direction and to motivate their action in the present. This existential effect complicates the meaning of Benjamin's idea of truth, and requires careful attention to the ways he thinks experience of an image, even if this occurs in language, can have such an effect. In particular, as I will argue below, Benjamin's deployment of the idea of truth requires a more precise formulation of the image-word relation than that provided by Friedlander. Particular features of word and image, which are defined not just as distinct but opposed in Benjamin's early work, have become shared properties of both categories in the *Arcades Project*.

II   Name-language and the Cited Historical Wish

Benjamin's early conception of name-language may be viewed as a prototype for the use he makes of the cited historical wish in the *Arcades Project*. The main effects of name-language in the paradisiacal state – secure knowledge, and the existential security that comes from belonging to a community in which things and others are transparent to scrutiny – are the components of the reconciled life that shapes Benjamin's late conception of revolution. The signal differences are that the late conception needs to grapple with a series

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33   M. Pensky, "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. D. S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 177–198.

34   E. Friedlander, "The Measure of the Contingent: Walter Benjamin's Dialectical Image," *boundary 2* (Fall 2008), 1–26, 4.

35   Friedlander, "Measure of the Contingent," 9.

of historical problems which are redundant in the earlier conception. Among these are the difficulty of instilling revolutionary motivation and the challenge of finding the clarity needed to attain existential security when an oppressive, opaque carapace of semblance forms is ascendant. The convergence of features formerly allocated uniquely to the word or the image negotiates these problems: the word brings clarity and security of meaning and the image brings these qualities to immediate experience. Their putative convergence is Benjamin's answer to the problem of revolutionary motivation.

In his 1916 essay on language, Benjamin describes as "invalid and empty" the "bourgeois conception of language." According to this conception, the "means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being." Benjamin contrasts "bourgeois" language with "the other conception of language," which "knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication." This "other" language is man's communication with God: "It means: *in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God.*"[36] The name has a general significance beyond the proper name, which Benjamin describes as "the communion of man with the *creative* word of God." Indeed Benjamin contends that in the naming language of Adam, names grasp the essence of things. In the naming language of man there is, he writes, "a further linguistic communion with God's word." "Through the word, man is bound to the language of things. The human word is the name of things. Hence, it is no longer conceivable, as the bourgeois view of language maintains, that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention."[37] The name-language extends a vital sense of community between things and man; the ground of this community is cognitive, in the eminent sense of Benjamin's contention that in the name the essence of things is grasped.

The knowledge that is secured in the "communion" with the creative word of God engenders a state of transparent community, between words and things, and between humans and the things that they name. In this early paradisiacal model the communion between man's naming language and the creative word of God extends to human beings the profound existential security that comes with the guarantee that man "is himself creative."[38] If the creative word of God is the authoritative ground for these emancipatory goods in Benjamin's early work, the *Arcades* seeks an alternative epistemological ground that is able to acknowledge human creativity, now understood as the truth of human history,

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36   Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 65.

37   Ibid., 69.

38   Ibid.

and which extends to human beings the existential security that comes from the capacity to identify and destroy false forces of totalisation. The paradigm of the transparency of meaning in language is theological in the sources it draws on in Benjamin's thought, but it now must find in history the guarantee hitherto provided by reference to the creative intention of God. Moreover, in his use of the tactics of a scenography of vivid images to instil revolutionary motivation, the epistemological qualities of language have now been brought into direct relation with the image.

The role that the image has of instilling revolutionary motivation as experience-able historical truth in the *Arcades* means that it enters a paradigm that, as I mentioned above, in the framework of Benjamin's early work, is foreign to it. If the image is opaque and ambiguous in the early work, the articulate word is clear and transparent. The vocabulary places the image on the side of oppression and the word on the side of emancipation. In contrast, in his late work Benjamin describes the dialectical image in terms of its crystallisation of the state of ambiguity: "Ambiguity is the manifest imaging of the dialectic, the law of dialectics at a standstill."[39] The dialectical image presents with clarity, here and now, ambiguity; it distils in a vivid experience the elements of the situation. The crucial factor in the modification of his position is the shift in Benjamin's thinking from the dogmatic *model* of the Fall, to the *problem* of historical emancipation.

In the earlier work the notion of the Fall is a cipher for oppression. And the oppression it marks is nearly total. "God's word curses the ground" and this "deeply" alters the "appearance of nature."[40] If nature could speak she "would begin to lament." Such is the effect on her of the Fall. Hence Benjamin aligns the change in her status that the post-lapsarian condition marks with the lowering over her of a shell of opacity.[41] In the case of humanity the consequences of the Fall with respect to language are more formidable still. Human beings seem to be condemned to a life of guilt and anxiety when they are cut off from the transcendent, creative word of God. These themes from the Language essay are taken up and transposed to a modern context in Benjamin's important 1924/5 essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. In this essay, Benjamin draws attention to the preoccupation of the characters in Goethe's novel with prosaic objects like cups and lockets. He describes the novel as a semblance world in which the endless projects of beautification of the house and grounds of the estate extend even to the funeral grounds of the ancestors, whose gravestones

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39   Benjamin, "Exposé of 1935," *Arcades Project*, 10.

40   Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 72.

41   Ibid.

are uprooted to make way for a clover covered path.[42] The essay on Goethe's novel endorses Benjamin's diagnosis of the consequences of the Fall in the Language essay. It sets apart articulated clarity from the sensuous form of the image. The characters in Goethe's novel look to sensuous forms and their "symbolic" meanings to provide a frame for how they should live. In this situation guilt is endemic. Humans attempt to abide by the rules they believe must be expressed in nature in the form of symbols and myths, which, however, remain ambiguous and thus a constant source of anxiety and guilt.[43] Against the paradigm of "free choice" in the novel, Benjamin draws attention to the novella it contains, which on his view models in the self-sacrificial actions of young lovers the expiating force of the articulated decision.[44] Benjamin argues that the willingness of the lovers to risk everything, including their lives when they dive into the dangerous current, wins for them the clarity that demolishes the forces of myth (i.e., nature) to define human life.[45] Their "moral decision" is contrasted with the drowning of the infant in the still waters of the lake in the novel. For Benjamin, this death is the consequence of the insertion of nature into the semiotic codes of myth. When human beings turn their back on the transcendent they become caught in a web of indecipherable sensuous forms, which come to have power over their lives and which they vainly try to interpret and propitiate. Benjamin thus views the aesthetic freedom exercised in the removal of the ancestor's gravestones as emblematic of the disregard for the transcendent, here represented by tradition, which entails entrapment in fate.

In the *Arcades* Benjamin's analysis is keyed more precisely to the idea of rescuing the historically frustrated wishes than it is to either the consequences of the Fall (the Language essay) or the distinctive traits of bourgeois civility and free choice (the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*). Nonetheless there are important continuities. It is still the captivation of human life in material forms – the phantasmagoria of the commodity – that is at issue. And as in the early work where clarity is paired with verbal articulation, here, too, the language of the name, albeit modified, provides the way out of the historical "dream." A certain type of language use marks the exit from entrapment in material form, which is equated in Benjamin's thought with freedom from guilt and anxiety. Above all, what is crucial to emphasize is that Benjamin uses a version of his early conception of the language of the name to contest the very

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42   Ibid., 302.

43   Ibid., 303.

44   Ibid., 330–332.

45   Ibid., 342–3.

idea that the type of meaning somehow to be divined from material, sensuous forms could provide the grounds for authentic human life. Such meaning is what his early work excoriates under the label of "myth." His late work alters the opposition between "myth" and truth (i.e., the illumination of the creative word of God). The image is no longer an entrapment that delivers life to anxiety and guilt. In the *Arcades* he joins together certain aspects that belong to the constellation of "myth" (such as the form of the commodities and the architectural form of the arcades) with the conception of emancipation in and through language. What is read in these forms is the wish, the absolute wish, for happiness and fulfilled life. The historical materialist brings this wish to articulation. Profane illumination is described as the moment of awakening from the dream. In Benjamin's historiography it is specifically the construction of the historical citation that dispels the semblance-power of the commodity and brings about an historical awakening.[46] It is worth thinking through the components of the conception of citation involved in this position.

The human desire for a fulfilled or reconciled life receives its articulable form in the nineteenth century. Here is *the* meaning of history, which finds expression, albeit in distorted form, in the figures of the nineteenth century, in a dream-state, as it were. The nineteenth century reveals the meaning of history, which is the essence of humanity. Another way of putting it: humanity as the subject of history articulates its "creative intention" in the nineteenth century, albeit in the form of images. The materialist historian has the task of "reading" those images; and they become legible in their construction as historical citations. Despite the transition from the model of the Fall to the problem of history, the account of fulfillment is still anchored, as it was in the early work, to the transparency of meaning. In the late as in the early work, Benjamin understands this transparency of meaning as the clarity of a (transcendent) authoritative intention that is articulated in language.

The historical citation has authority because it is not bound by transitory intentions. It arrives at this status because the nineteenth century has the extraordinary position for Benjamin of an historical moment of absolute truth. Furthermore, this conception of the nineteenth century relates particularly to

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46   See Benjamin's "Exposé of 1935," A, 13: "The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it – as Hegel already noticed – by cunning. With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled."

the technological feats of the age.[47] If the communion of naming language with the creative word of God had shown that "man is himself creative" in the early Language essay, in the *Arcades* the technological feats of the arcades which for the first time carve human creative energies in iron and glass reveal, without the explicit reference to God, the same truth about "man." The filigrees on the Paris arcades are one way that this late work coordinates the citation with the image on the crucial question of the legible historical wish. The iron lacework is an image, but it is also a pattern of writing insofar as it bears a legible meaning that is articulable as a citation: what it says is that the essence of humanity is its creativity. This creativity is known in the images of the nineteenth century, as these are deciphered and experienced in historical citation through the labors of historical materialism.

III   The Convertibility of the Features of Word and Image in the *Arcades*

In "Goethe's Elective Affinities" Benjamin details how the presumption that nature's forces and forms communicate vital meaning created conditions for anxiety and guilt.[48] In the perspective of Benjamin's early writing it is the articulate word that embodies truth. Adamic name-language is cognising language; it grasps the essence of things in their name. The non-discursive, sensuous form of the image, in contrast, only communicates ambiguous meaning. The *Arcades* therefore needs to be understood as marking a significant shift in Benjamin's thinking: it inaugurates the idea that historical knowledge is experience-able in an image.

   The scholarship on the *Arcades Project* has overlooked both the general significance of this shift, as well as its implications for understanding Benjamin's conception of historical emancipation. I have argued above that the status of the articulate nineteenth century wish as the site of the truth of history that propels revolutionary motivation is analogous to the guarantee the creative word of God provides for the cognitive status of name-language. I would like to argue in this section that when it is considered in the light of the earlier work on language, certain obscurities in the late conception of revolutionary emancipation are able to be resolved. In the final section I will consider how

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47   The title of the 1935 Exposé of the Project is "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century." See the discussion of iron construction in the Exposé, Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 3–4.

48   For the detail of this position see chapters 1 and 2 of A. Ross, *Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

the residual imprint of the early opposition between word and image none-theless leads some of the conceptual innovations of the *Arcades Project* into difficulties.

The shift in paradigm from the Fall to history does admit a resolution, which would align the important aspects of Benjamin's approach to history with the conception of name-language in the Language essay. Viewed from the model of that earlier work the two main puzzles of the *Arcades* are the guarantee for (historical) knowledge and the illuminating connection between language and things. In the Language essay name language is cognising language: what it names is created from God's word, and the communion with God's creative word is the guarantee that name language grasps the essence of things. The absence of logos and thus truth in the lives of the characters from Goethe's novel reinforces the point. When nature's forms are presumed to communicate vital meaning, but they do not speak, the only meaning they can furnish is ambiguous and nature therefore becomes a trap for human beings. If we look at the *Arcades Project* from the perspective of the schema that ties logos to truth and emancipation and its absence to oppressive ambiguity of meaning, it seems as if the nineteenth-century historical wish functions as some sort of analogue for God's creative word. What is important here is that the his-torical wish of the nineteenth century is articulated in the *Arcades* in the form of historical citation. Some of the important continuities across Benjamin's corpus flow from this point: the knowledge that banishes existential anxiety is articulate; the word is the ground of truth; and, although the shift from the early paradisiacal model to the problem of historical emancipation obscures the point, like name-language, the technical feats of the nineteenth century testify to the creative vocation of human beings.

There are also important continuities between Benjamin's early writing and the epistemological model he uses in the *Arcades Project*. The idea that the past nineteenth-century wish has general epistemological significance takes up his view in the Preface to the *Trauerspiel* book that the general situation may only be known through the knowledge of the extreme case.[49]

The substantial point of discontinuity that remains between the two peri-ods is Benjamin's view that (historical) knowledge be experience-able. This requirement does not just alter the terms of his earlier condemnation of the image; it also raises questions about the adequacy of the authenticating

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49   W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne(London: Verso, 2009), 35. See also page 105: "Everything moral is bound to life in its extreme sense, that is to say, where it fulfils itself in death."

reference to the articulate historical wish (i.e., the citation) to secure the epistemological claim of the image.

Attention to the change in the respective status of word and image as these relate to truth and knowledge across the corpus can help to clarify the issues. In the *Arcades Project* Benjamin needs both the image (since it has a binding existential status as the mode for the experience of meaning) and the word (which carries the truth value that follows from discursive form, i.e., the occurrence of the wish in the articulate form of language). In fact, the positive features of word and image become largely interchangeable across these categories in the *Arcades*. Two examples can elucidate the implications of this point.

First, in a famous passage Benjamin claims that he only needs to "show" and not to "say" anything: in the N convolute he writes that the dialectical image does not require "ingenious formulations": "I needn't say anything. Merely show. [...] [T]he 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."[50] At first glance, the comment appears to stand against the association of the articulate word with truth in his early writing. And in the weight it gives to the image over the word, it seems to entail a wholesale abandonment of that earlier framework. However, the idea that it would be otiose to "say" anything might better be understood as a refusal of the implied obligation on Benjamin to provide a motivating explanation for historical agents, what he refers to disparagingly as "ingenious formulations." The passage thus refers specifically to his reluctance to be the "author" of the meaning that the recipient of the image experiences. It is properly the thwarted wishes of past generations that are experienced in the image – not the views of Benjamin.[51] These thwarted wishes alone have motivational force in the present.

In this respect, the cited phrase can usefully be understood as consistent with Benjamin's early theory of truth. In the Preface to his study of the German mourning play, Benjamin defines truth as an intention-less state.[52] It must exceed the transitoriness of a particular intention. It also has a moral quality that comes from its independence from the views of particular agents.[53] It follows that historical truth cannot be the communication of doctrine. In this

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50   Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 460 [N1a, 8].

51   Cf. the positions of Pensky and Rancière that the meaning of the old commodities is ultimately reducible to the arbitrary views of their interpreter. Pensky, "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images," 177–198; and Rancière, "The Archaeomodern Turn," 24–41.

52   Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 36.

53   See for instance Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" essay in *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 236–252.

regard, Benjamin appeals to the force that comes from the experience of an image to insulate his *Project* from the criticism that it instructs or prosecutes a case from a position of partiality. Herein lies the significance of the specific terms of the exchange between the features of the image and the word. The image "occurs in language" and although it is "shown" in Benjamin's collection of material, by virtue of its occurrence in language, strictly speaking it is articulate independently of this "showing." Benjamin's view that he doesn't need to say anything would appear to refer to the exigency of avoiding the ruinous partiality of intention, which he considers to exclude truth, as well as the superfluousness of doctrinal instruction for the type of motivation he thinks is properly stimulated through the graphic perceptibility of meaning. The position on "showing" thus seems to take the perspective of the image *and* of the word: the articulate wish is communicated in the citation form. Its hold derives from the status of the past wish as a non-transitory intention for human fulfilment (i.e., in this sense analogous to the creative intention of God in the creative word). And it is "shown" because, like an image, the meaning it communicates makes an experiential claim on its recipient. For Benjamin's peculiar notion of revolution what prompts action is the experience of the truth of history – and such experience needs to emerge from the perception of the meaning of the past. Despite the ordinary meaning conveyed by the reference to this operation as one of "showing" and not "saying," the position combines the features of the word (in the use of citations and Benjamin's conception of the truth qualities of language) and the image (in the idea of an existential experience). This combination lets Benjamin put forth the view that an existentially gripping experience of meaning, i.e., of historical veracity, can be had in the presence of the refuse collected in the *Arcades*.

Another instance in which the features of the word and image, which had been opposed in his early writing, become interchangeable is in Benjamin's view in the *Arcades Project* that "history decays into images, not into stories."[54] The image, Benjamin asserts, is the most basic, ineradicable element of history, the "primal phenomenon," he claims.[55] Stories, in contrast, are written from the perspective of the victor. It is traditional history that produces narrative.[56] The narratives of traditional history consign to oblivion the struggles of the past and the desires and aspirations that had driven them. Benjamin's conception of history as a form of remembrance is relevant here. Benjamin cites Horkheimer's view that "[p]ast injustice has occurred and is completed. The

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54   Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 476 [N 11, 4].

55   Ibid., 474 [N9a, 4].

56   Ibid., 475 [N10a, 1].

slain are really slain. . . . [. . .] [T]he sufferings of the past are irreparable." And he counters that "history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance *<Eingedenken>*. What science has 'determined,' remembrance can modify."[57] The conception of history as remembrance is set against "conventional historiography."[58] The materialist historiography that aims to rescue the lost wishes of the nineteenth century is described as possessing a "destructive or critical momentum." It is also characterized as "the caesura in the movement of thought." The characterization of the image as "dialectics at a standstill" is how Benjamin describes its capacity to stand apart from the continuum of history. "Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears." Notable here is that both the "object" and the "citation" of history are described as having been violently expelled "from the continuum of historical process." "[T]he object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process."[59] The terms Benjamin uses to articulate the caesura-effect of the dialectical image are entirely exchangeable with the description of the role of citation in materialist history. Materialist history is citation; what it cites is "torn from its context."[60] The citation, like the dialectical image, does not impart knowledge in the sense of the communication of historical information – it imparts the truth of history as an experience. In these passages, there are at least two significations attached to the word "citation." It describes the content of the *Project* as a (materialist) presentation of history in the form of citations, but in its crucial second signification these citations are the engine of materialist history because of the historical wishes they house and which in their "showing" of history they make re-experience-able. The decay of history into an image is not a shedding of the words of narrative for the materiality of truth; rather, it is the experience in a citation of historical truth. The citation has incorporated the features of Benjamin's earlier conception of the image in the sense that the wish it communicates holds experiential force.

Like the distinction between "saying" and "showing," the distinction between the "story" and the "image" also has a strong connection with important themes in Benjamin's early writing. In particular, the position Benjamin takes on the primal significance of the image (its ineradicable quality) conforms to his early

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57   Ibid., 471 [N8, 1].
58   Ibid., 475 [N10, 4].
59   Ibid., 475 [N10a, 3].
60   Ibid., 476 [N11, 3].

definition of "origin" in his book on the German mourning play as that which is "lifted out of" the process of becoming. "The naked and manifest existence of the factual," he had argued in that earlier work, is unable to reveal anything. Rather, the "totality of its history" is the schema of revelation for an idea's truth:

> On the one hand [the origin] needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and re-establishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history. Origin is not, therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development.[61]

In the *Arcades* the problem of "fathoming an origin" is pursued in "the origin of the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline." If Benjamin locates "this origin in the economic facts," these facts are not themselves "primal phenomena; they become such only insofar as in their own individual development – 'unfolding' might be a better term – they give rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants."[62] The reference to the "primal phenomena," which Benjamin also uses in the same convolute to refer to the primacy of the image in history, indicates that it is the "arcade's concrete historical forms" that are the sites in which an idea is lifted out of the eddy of historical process to become "in the totality of its history," i.e., in its full development from beginning to decline, an experience of truth. The concept of the historical image takes up these aspects of Benjamin's earlier conception of "origin" – not least in his contention that the image is the primal phenomenon of history. But in the *Arcades Project* what is especially significant is that the new element of the existential hold of historical knowledge is added to this early conception of "origin." To be more precise, in its idea of the historical image the *Arcades* introduces a charged relation to the past. Put differently, the past becomes experience-able in an image, and in this existential mode it is moved out of its past-ness and into the present, or, in Benjamin's terminology, the "now." "[T]he relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images

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61   Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 45–6.
62   Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 462 [N2a, 4].

are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. Awakening."[63]

IV The Function of Historical Citation in Benjamin's Revolutionary Epistemology

I have argued here that the *Arcades* opens multiple points of exchange between the terms of Benjamin's early definition of word and image. The truth of the articulate wish of the past in the historical citation is described as "graphically perceptible" and the image is described as "readable" and in this respect the vocabulary of "word" and "image" that his early work had opposed are not just deployed in concert, but specific features of the vocabulary of "word" and "image" become exchangeable. The terms of this exchange remain governed by the concepts of Benjamin's earliest thinking and especially the connections his early work conceives among knowledge, truth and name-language. The precise form the exchange takes is determined by the exigencies of Benjamin's attempt to grapple with the historical problem of revolutionary experience. However, the determining role of Benjamin's early opposition between word and image leads some of the conceptual innovations of the *Arcades Project* into difficulties. In short, the theological perspective of name language is not ideally matched to the project of discerning redemptive potential in the nineteenth-century wish.

On the one hand, the connection intends to vouchsafe the epistemological claim that the nineteenth century is the historical moment that bears the truth of history per se. It is one of the mechanisms (others include the notion of the nineteenth century as the "historical index" that points forward to its redemption in the twentieth) that Benjamin uses to defend the claims he makes about the nineteenth century as the moment of exception that holds general historical pertinence. On the other, without the figure of the creative God to secure the transparency between words and things in the pre-lapsarian state, the functions of truth that Benjamin associates with language in the *Arcades* are fatally weakened. In this respect the transfer of features like articulate clarity from word to image does not retain the force of these features in the early work. The difficulties can be seen in Benjamin's treatment of the problem of the "collective" dimension of the "graphic" perception of history. The category of "intention-less" truth in the early work places "truth" beyond the claim of the venal and partial interests of individuals. Certain of Benjamin's early essays

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63   Ibid., 462 [N2a, 3].

like the "Critique of Violence" deem such intention-less truth to be morally probative. However, in his treatment of historical knowledge the presumed transparency of relations that defines the paradisiacal model of secure knowledge is absent. It might be that the "showing" of history in citations, or the truths housed in the primal historical unit of the "image" are independent of the agendas of an historical interpreter. The difficulty is that unlike the pre-lapsarian state in which God secures epistemological transparency the collective basis for the perception of "historical" truth has entirely eroded. The truth of the image is collective since it bears the truth of history, but the conditions of possibility for its perception as such are fragmented or lost. They depend on the moral sensitivity of those singular individuals able to "see" or "read" them. The way Benjamin distinguishes between citation and the articulated historical wish can be used to develop the implications of this point. In particular, the distinction can highlight some of the consequences for historical knowledge of the terms of the exchange between the features of word and image in the late work.

As we have seen, historical citation has a double meaning. It refers to the articulate historical wish of the nineteenth century for emancipation as such wishes are collected in the citations of the *Arcades Project*. In addition, the historical citation has the experiential hold of an image that shapes motivation in the present. When Benjamin treats the figure of the materialist historian he clearly distinguishes between these two senses of citation. More than this, he disentangles the experiential hold of the "citation" from the territory of the "word" and places it squarely in the domain of the "image." At the same time, his use of the terminology of "citation," "text" and "legibility" confer the values of clarity and legible truth that are part of his early conception of the "word" to the existential hold he ascribes to the image. He writes:

> The events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink. The history which he lays before the reader comprises, as it were, the citations occurring in this text, and it is only these citations that occur in a manner legible to all. To write history thus means to *cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context.[64]

The text that is "written in invisible ink" is not just the time of the historian since the concept of citation entails the idea that "the historical object […] is

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64   Ibid., 476 [N11, 3].

torn from its context." The shifts in this passage from "events" to "objects" and the text of "invisible ink" to the "writing of history" can be clarified if we place them in the context of Benjamin's early conception of "origin." Like "the totality" of the beginning and decline of the arcades, so the events surrounding the historian constitute a totality. And like the arcades, this totality is not the mere or naked existence of what is factual, but, as we saw in the previous section, the form that is revealed "fulfilled." Like the concrete historical forms from the arcades, so these events are revealed when they are "torn" from their context. This tearing away from context is the way that the "historical object" is saved from the obsolescence it acquires when it is absorbed in the totality of "the past."[65] The concept of origin, in Benjamin's hands, is the way to fragment a false totality and find truth in its ruins. The vocabulary of citation thus echoes the mortifying function of the concept of the expressionless, which his early writing describes as the broken "torso" of the symbol.[66]

Like the figures or images cited in the *Arcades*, the past events are rescued in the specific sense that they attain legibility.[67] This legibility lifts the experience of historical perception above the fragment that is its occasion. For the scale of this redemptive experience of historical legibility is not restricted to the "objects" or "events" of the nineteenth century. It makes the meaning of history as such experience-able. The epistemological veracity of the revolutionary perspective mandates these heightened stakes. For this reason, the historian's experience is the "text written in invisible ink." The past the historian presents does not concern the fulfilment of an individual wish, but of the extraordinary generation of the nineteenth century. The implied contrast of the citation with the expression of a merely personal past draws on Benjamin's early definition of truth as intention-less.

The definition of the historical citation as the legibility, i.e., truth, of the past has motivational force. "The now of recognisability is the moment of awakening."[68] This "recognisability" changes the meaning of the past entirely, down to its smallest details. The comprehensiveness of the experience, the way it persuades the recipient to act, are all features that give definition and form to history. More specifically, the awakening experienced bestows meaning and purpose on the recipient's existence. This aspiration for the experience of the past wish to generate revolutionary motivation explains the

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65   For Benjamin "An object of history is that through which knowledge is constituted as the object's rescue," *Arcades Project*, 476 [N11, 4].

66   Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 340.

67   Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 462 [N3, 1].

68   Ibid., 486 [N18, 4].

convergence across "image" and "word" of characteristics hitherto implacably divided between them. The illumination of the essence of things in name-language remains the model of emancipation, but it now includes the idea that the experience of form entails resolute shaping of the will for action.

Nonetheless the difficulty remains: if its truth quality is what makes the citation occur "in a manner legible to all" then does the revolutionary meaning of the past lose perceptibility when this collective condition is absent? To put the point in the more restricted form of Benjamin's terminology of the "reader": What the historian lays out "before the reader" in its heightened collective legibility is not necessarily experienced in this distinctive mode of legibility. This unbridgeable gap between collective legibility and an individual experience of meaning may be seen as the effect of the shift across Benjamin's corpus from the model of the "material community" of the pre-lapsarian state of transparency to the problem of the historical "legibility to all" sought in citation. The perception of revolutionary meaning is based in historical knowledge, which is "binding for the historian."[69] But such "binding" knowledge does not necessarily extend its grip more widely. The historical citation is no match for the creative word of God on which it is modelled. A transcendent historical truth is oxymoronic in a way that the hold on a community of the creative force of the word of a transcendent creator is not.

The significant shift across the corpus is Benjamin's positive re-evaluation of the image, and this occurs once he brings the image into relation with the word. Benjamin's idea that the meaning of history can be perceived in an image is the core of his late conception of revolution.[70] I have argued here that this idea depends in crucial ways on the stabilising knowledge his earliest writing attaches to language.

The experience of the meaning of history in the dialectical image and the materialist historian's use of citation has the clarity of truth. And such clarity,

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69   Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 464, [N4, 4].

70   A similar dynamic occurs in the conception of similitude in the middle period of Benjamin's thinking. Here too the image is redeemed in so far as it is given the qualities of clarity and transparency that, in the early work, belong uniquely to the word. Perhaps the opposition Benjamin deploys between "story" and "image" shows that in so far as the framework of "graphic perception" entails an experience of meaning, "story" and "image" are also convertible categories. A story is effective in shaping a situation as amenable to action when it has the features of vivid experience that are attached to the (experience-ability of the) image. The pathos-filled citations of failed struggles *are* the citation of a motivating story: in the experience of their meaning in a word-image, such stories give shape and direction to action. I explore this thesis in Ross, *Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image*.

which is unique to articulate forms of language and guaranteed in the early writing by the authority of the creative word of God and, in the later, by the cited wishes of past generations, is alone for Benjamin sufficient grounds for action. The "graphic" perception of history thus generates existentially binding meaning because the image space it requires occurs in what, for Benjamin, is the eminently cognitive space of language. This is why the image is "read" and the word is "shown."

The components of Benjamin's distinctive perspective on history are intelligible only in relation to the existential force that he allocates to the image, on the one hand, and to the knowledge he thinks belongs to the articulate word, on the other. The features of his early thinking on the word/image distinction are fused together in this approach to the revolutionary hold of historical knowledge. In its new alliance with the word, the image supports an experience of collective meaning that expels the paralysis of anxiety and guilt in favor of resolute motivation. The difficulty is that in so far as the framework of "graphic perception" entails an experience of motivating meaning, the citation model of history is unable to secure the extension of its sought after legibility to a recipient. This is one respect in which the model of naming language that underpins Benjamin's approach to the revolutionary potential of history is at odds with the contingencies involved in the communication of historical knowledge.