The Coming of Paper: Aesthetic Value from Ruskin to Benjamin

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Slowly, with eyes turned cautiously upward, he sought to learn what was happening up there, took one of the papers from the desk without looking at it, laid it on his open hand and raised it up gradually to the gentlemen while himself standing up. In doing so he had no definite purpose, but merely acted with the feeling that this was how he would have to conduct himself when he had finished the great petition that was to exonerate him completely. The Assistant-Manager, who was giving his full attention to the conversation, merely glanced fleetingly at the paper, not at all reading over what was there—for what was important to the Chief Clerk was unimportant to him—took it from K.'s hand, said: “Thanks, I already know everything,” and calmly laid it back on the table.

—Franz Kafka, The Trial

In their classic study *The Coming of the Book* (1958), Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin inform us that paper production was industrialized at the end of the eighteenth century in order to meet the demands for information, administration, and public instruction.¹ Like its ancient precursor, papyrus, paper had been valued throughout medieval and renaissance Europe as a practical and efficient
medium: even its relative ephemerality seemed well-suited to the short-term needs of record-keeping, administrative memoranda, and business correspondence. For the ends of the Enlightenment mass produced paper presented itself as the ideal medium. And indeed the economic and political institutions that emerged in the nineteenth century would be unimaginable without it. Mass produced paper also played an important role in the literature of this period. Here, however, something of a conflict started to surface. It is especially evident in popular fiction. For, while industrial paper made possible the mass circulation of narrative fiction in the nineteenth century, the image of paper often appeared in this fiction as the instrument, not of enlightenment, but of ideology. The unfulfilled promise of mass produced paper in Balzac’s *Illusions perdues* and the endless stream of paper that issues from Chancery Court in Dickens’s *Bleak House* are typical of the decidedly unenlightened character of paper in much nineteenth-century popular literature. The image of paper in Kafka’s *The Trial* plays on this nineteenth-century motif up to a point. K.’s story has often been viewed as an inscrutable, apparently pointless trail of bureaucratic paper: “Here are my papers [*Legitimationspapiere*], now show me yours,” he ineffectually commands the officious warders arresting him at the outset. And yet in the passage cited above paper appears to take on a certain, if somewhat enigmatic, kind of value. The image of paper here is not reducible to the traditional alternatives: it is neither the picture of enlightenment—of the efficient dissemination of knowledge—nor the stereotypical nineteenth-century metaphor for the spread of ideology and bureaucratic nonsense. Paper is handled differently here; it appears to mean something, as we say. The Assistant-Manager does not notice: he does not bother to “read over” the paper, much less “over-read” it (*überlesen* is the word here). He “already knows everything.” But his “fleeting [*flüchtig*] glance” is something of a missed opportunity. Walter Benjamin suggests such an observation when he cites this passage in a discussion of “gesture” [*Gestus* or *Gebärde*] in Kafka. For Benjamin this scene is an especially valuable specimen in his inquiry into gesture: K.’s handling of paper shows how Kafka makes gesture “the subject for reflection without end” [*einen Gegenstand zu Überlegungen, die kein Ende nehmen*]. The appearance of paper here bears more scrutiny, as Benjamin himself demonstrates when he comes back to the subject of paper later in his essay. Though he does not lay them out explicitly here, Benjamin’s citation carries implications that are worth
unfolding—implications for an approach to the image of paper as a sign of aesthetic value in the nineteenth century. What follows here is an attempt to begin such an explication.

Paper was deeply involved in the debates about value in the nineteenth century. As the dominant medium of economic and aesthetic exchange during this period, it was a troubling image to many. The problem was one of value, and value, as we will pursue it here, is a matter of what the philosopher of science, Émile Meyerson calls “conservation principles.” For value in economics and aesthetics is a matter of lasting—of persisting in time—and paper, as noted, had long been seen as an ephemeral medium, a medium lacking in substance or weight. Paper was thus troubling because it challenged the traditional identification of value with substance. What comes to the surface with paper in the nineteenth century, then, is an alternative understanding of value, one with important, and complex, affiliations to a widespread discourse of virtuality that, as several historians have shown, emerged in nineteenth-century natural and social sciences in the wake of Kant and Naturphilosophie. Moreover, as part of this broader discourse of virtuality, with its theories of energy and force-field, paper in economics and aesthetics came into conflict with the more traditional substance-theory of value that was fundamental to classical political economy. Since much current discussion of aesthetic value has been satisfied to identify it with this traditional eighteenth-century theory, the importance of the fundamental conflict in which the debates over paper participated have been largely overlooked. If we are to become aware of what John Guillory, for example, calls a certain cultural “amnesia” about ideas of aesthetic value, we will have to arrive at a more complex understanding of its origins than has been offered of late. A reconsideration of paper in the aesthetics of the nineteenth century would move in this direction. By drawing on the broad history and meaning of paper as a medium, a reading of the image of paper in certain works of this period would make a valuable contribution to the current discussion by elaborating a dynamic understanding of aesthetic value that has its origin in an ancient, ongoing epistemic conflict.

I.

Ancient Egypt, scholars tell us, consisted of two linguistic cultures that existed side-by-side: on the one hand, there was the everyday language of the street and the marketplace and, on the other, the sacred
language of eternity. Egyptian “diglossia,” it seems, manifested itself in a wide range of contexts. With respect to architecture, for example, the Greek chronicler Hecataeus reports that the ancient Egyptians referred to the buildings in which they lived as “shelters” (katalyseis) while calling the graves in which they were buried “eternal houses” (aidioi oikoi). Such a distinction operates throughout the architectural vocabulary of ancient Egypt between the merely functional buildings like residences, which were usually made of clay, and monumental structures like graves, temples, steles, statues, pyramids, obelisks, and so on, which were made of stone. Some scholars have stressed that the dichotomy between the everyday and the eternal in “stone cultures” like that of ancient Egypt is especially evident in their writing practices. Referring to Hecataeus’s account, the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann observes, for instance:

[T]hrough the Egyptian writing system runs the same boundary that Hecataeus recognized in Egyptian architecture—the one separating the monumental from the functional. The monumental writing of hieroglyphs, as opposed to other pictographic systems, faithfully preserved its original iconicity over three and a half millennia . . . . With this writing stone ‘monuments’ were inscribed. For everyday purposes, by contrast, one did not of course use stone but more portable materials like papyrus, pieces of clay or limestone, wood, leather and so on. Employed for these was cursive writing, which deviated from the realistic pictorial quality of hieroglyphs, distilling from them only certain distinguishing features.14

This “digraphism” of ancient Egypt left a profound impression on classical antiquity, as has been especially shown with respect to the hieroglyph. Assmann and other archeologists of the ancient communicative media have been demonstrating recently what Hegel believed before them: everything from the schemata in Plato to the emergence of the principle of canonization in art can be traced to the monumental language of Egyptian stone culture.15

But the stone culture of ancient Egypt anticipates other, more modern contexts as well. This is suggested by Benjamin’s citation of Kafka in which paper takes on the enduring character reserved for the hieroglyph—“a subject for reflection without end.” Indeed the digraphism of stone culture persists throughout the whole modern history of “the coming of paper.” Of increasing import, especially in the period that concerns us, is the legacy of the hieratic, cursive medium of papyrus in the form of its modern successor, paper. But this is not to say that the monumental language of stone ceased to exert its influence on modernity. On the contrary, it is precisely the
legacy of stone as an image of endurance that reasserts itself in the
conflict over paper at a time when the latter took on greater
importance as a medium. The traces of this digraphic tradition in the
nineteenth-century discourse of value are perhaps nowhere more
profound and more subtle than in the writings of John Ruskin. The
author of *The Stones of Venice* is of special interest in this context
because as he attempts to elaborate a general theory of value that
would be equally valid for aesthetics and economics, his work
oscillates in a highly revealing and exemplary “digraphic” manner—
between “stone” and “paper.” We can get a sense of this oscillation,
and of its exemplarity for the conflict over value theories in the
nineteenth century, if we look briefly at Ruskin’s use of the metaphor
of electricity in two key passages from his work.

The first is from Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* (1860–62), specifically the
second essay entitled “The Veins of Wealth.” The subject here is how
ignorant “men of business” are about the true nature of “wealth,” in
particular its relative character:

Men nearly always speak and write as if riches were absolute . . . . Whereas
riches are a power like that of electricity, acting only through inequalities
or negations of itself. The force of the guinea you have in your pocket
depends wholly on the default of a guinea in your neighbour’s pocket. If
he did not want it, it would be of no use to you; the degree of power it
possesses depends accurately upon the need or desire he has for it,—and
the art of making yourself rich, in the ordinary mercantile economist’s
sense, is therefore equally and necessarily the art of keeping your neighbour
poor.16

This passage shows the kinship of Ruskin’s political economy to the
“neoclassical” or “marginal” theory of value that would come to
dominate economics after Jevons’s work in the 1870s.17 Like the
marginalists, Ruskin wants to introduce relationality into economics
and into the discourse of wealth. Ruskin’s main point, here and
throughout the essay, is that “men of business” do not know what
wealth means; as he says in this passage, they do not “know the
meaning of the word ‘rich.’” They are using words and engaging in
practices that they do not understand, words and practices that are in
fact meaningful, unbeknownst to them, only in relation to other words
and practices. Especially significant is Ruskin’s selection of electricity
as a figure of relationality, first in his elucidation of the “relative
character of the word “rich”—that it, as he says, implies “its opposite
‘poor’ as positively as the word ‘north’ implies its opposite ‘south’”—
and then in his declaration that “riches are a power like that of
electricity, acting only through inequalities or negations of itself.”¹⁸
The word “electricity” derives from the Greek word for amber and, given that it was also the name of the metal alloy of gold and silver used for ancient Greek “electrum” coins, it might be expected to come to mind in a discussion of wealth. But the use Ruskin makes of the word “electricity” here is noteworthy for other reasons—reasons having to do with the importance of this term to the social history of Victorian Britain and, still more decisively for us here as we approach a reading of Benjamin, with developments in nineteenth-century natural philosophy.¹⁹ For the electricity that appears in Ruskin’s discussion of economic or exchange value was very much in the air during the middle decades of the nineteenth century when Faraday’s famous experiments leading to the development of a field theory of electromagnetism were popularized.²⁰ For Ruskin, much as indeed for his contemporary, Karl Marx, the electricity that manifests itself in rubs with the other—that is, in exchange—must not be “substantialized.” Otherwise, it can become the instrument of individual or private appropriation, something that was really occurring on a grand scale in the British Empire during the time both Marx and Ruskin were writing in its capital, and something that was occurring ideally in the work of British political economy and, for Marx, in German Idealist speculation.²¹ Thus, in keeping with the scientific developments that were informed by German natural philosophy, electricity for Ruskin in his economic writing is less a substance than a field: it describes a force-field not to be imagined as a substance—like the ether or the phlogiston of eighteenth-century chemistry—but rather as a medium that must not become the substantial object of a private appropriation.²² By drawing on the popular language of energy and field, then, Ruskin is starting to elaborate what some economic historians call a “virtual” theory of value—the theory that would challenge the traditional eighteenth-century theory of value based on the metaphor of substance.²³

Something curious occurs, however, as we move from the discussion of value in Ruskin’s political economy to his aesthetics. For now we encounter the oscillation mentioned above. It surfaces when we turn to the discussion of aesthetic and specifically literary value in “Of Kings’ Treasuries,” the first essay in Sesame and Lilies, a volume which appeared just a few years after Unto This Last. As in the discussion of economic value, electricity plays a key role in the analysis of value in aesthetics. Now, though, it appears in a significantly different guise, specifically as a substance in the form of gold. This is especially
striking in Ruskin’s description of how aesthetic value is extracted through reading:

[B]e sure . . . if the author is worth anything, that you will not get at his meaning all at once;—nay, that at his whole meaning you will not for a long time arrive in any wise. Not that he does not say what he means, and in strong words too; but he cannot say it all; and what is more strange, will not, but in a hidden way and in parables, in order that he may be sure you want it. I cannot quite see the reason of this, nor analyse that cruel reticence in the breasts of wise men which makes them always hide their deeper thought. They do not give it you by way of help, but of reward; and will make themselves sure that you deserve it before they allow you to reach it. But it is the same with the physical type of wisdom, gold. There seems, to you and me, no reason why the electric forces of the earth should not carry whatever there is of gold within it at once to the mountain tops, so that kings and people might know that all the gold they could get was there; and without any trouble of digging, or anxiety, or chance, or waste of time, cut it away, and coin as much as they needed. But Nature does not manage it so. She puts it in little fissures in the earth, nobody knows where: you may dig long and find none; you must dig painfully to find any. (262)

Here, in contrast to Unto This Last, electricity appears impotent as a means of imagining the circulation of value, which is now compared to the very substantial “physical type of wisdom, gold.” In “Of Kings’ Treasuries,” in other words, the appropriate natural metaphor for value is not field, but substance. The source of this substance theory of value is suggested by the reference to parables in this passage.24 It becomes more explicit later in Ruskin’s description of the wisdom that constitutes the value of literature:

Suppose there ever should arise a Fourth order of kings, who had read, in some obscure writing of long ago, that there was a Fourth kind of treasure, which the jewel and gold could not equal, neither should it be valued with pure gold. A web made faire in the weaving, by Athena’s shuttle; an armour, forged in divine fire by Vulcanian force; a gold to be mined in the very sun’s red heart, where he sets over the Delphian cliffs;—deep-pictured tissue;—impenetrable armour;—potable gold! (285)

It will prove significant that in both of these passages from “Of Kings’ Treasuries” the image of gold seems to pull back from the certain possibilities—as we will see, certain “virtual” possibilities—implied by the idea of literature as textual surface. Significantly, the “web” and the “armour” are recontained by metallic substantialization. Or, in other words, the very theory of value that seems to be targeted and criticized from a perspective closer to energy and field theory in the
lectures on political economy returns three years later in the discussion of value in literature. In his aesthetics, then, Ruskin appears to forget his own political economy and to turn instead to the substance theory of value that the lectures on exchange set out to undermine. But rather than merely identifying this return of the traditional theory we must take note of the specific manner in which this return or forgetting occurs. For the substance theory comes back in connection with electricity—the very figure that was the source of the virtual theory of value toward which Ruskin was moving in his political economy. This is not, therefore, a simple case of forgetting, at least not in the literal sense. The appearance of the electrical metaphor is a sign that Ruskin does not want to lose hold of the earlier, more dynamic idea of value and, precisely because of this, feels compelled to subordinate it to the substantial image of value as gold. He tries to conserve the virtual theory of value by way of a substance theory of value. That is why the gold and electricity are so closely intertwined in the passages just cited from "Of Kings’ Treasuries." The turn to what might be called an aesthetics of stone is better understood as both a swerve away from and an attempt to conserve certain possibilities contained in the virtual theory of value advanced in his political economic writing, which was after all, as we noted, a theory of value as an ephemeral, and thus inappropriable, phenomenon. The conservation principles to which Ruskin has recourse here are ancient, as suggested by its Biblical sources, sources which are in turn rooted in the even more ancient Egyptian stone culture mentioned at the outset. But these principles are also firmly planted in the nineteenth century, as we will see clearly in the case of Hegel. Ruskin is exemplary not simply because he oscillates between competing sets of conservation principles, but because he allows us to catch a glimpse of a highly dynamic understanding of value that derives from an ongoing digraphic conflict.

II.

One of the first to notice this quality in Ruskin’s work was his French translator, Marcel Proust. In the preface to his 1907 translation of Sesame and Lilies Proust offered a critique of Ruskin from a perspective which seems to draw on the same source as the electrical metaphors in Ruskin’s political economy: the image of the force-field and, behind it, the idea of energy—of force traversing and operating between bodies being more fundamental than substance. Proust
criticized what he called Ruskin’s “fetishistic respect for books” [*respect fétichiste pour les livres*], an idolatry that substantializes literary value and imagines it as comparable to “a material thing deposited between the leaves of books.” By contrast, Proust insists that the conserving action of reading concentrates on “interstices”: “not only the sentences [of a text] . . . [but] between the sentences . . . in the interval separating them, there still remains today as in an inviolate burial chamber, filling the interstices, a silence centuries old.”

Conservation here, like memory in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is a matter of fragmentation and division, as Proust illustrates in this passage with the example of the diacritical marks (the colons) that divide and interrupt Biblical texts. In the final paragraph of “Journées de lectures,” the evocation of reading—Proust’s critique of Ruskin’s aesthetics—comes to the stones of Venice, specifically to the two columns in Saint Mark’s Square that support the Lion of Saint Mark and Saint Theodore trampling the crocodile:

Yes, in the middle of the public square, in the midst of today whose empire it interrupts at this place, a little of the twelfth century, of the twelfth century long since vanished, springs up in a double, light thrust of pink granite. All around, the actual days, the days we are living, circulate, rush buzzing around the columns, but suddenly stop there, flee like repelled bees; for those high and slender enclaves of the past are not in the present, but in another time where the present is forbidden to penetrate. Around the pink columns, surging up toward their wide capitals, the days of the present crowd and buzz. But, interposed between them, the columns push them aside, reserving with all their slender impenetrability the inviolate place of the Past: of the Past familiarly risen in the midst of the present, with the rather unreal complexion of things which a kind of illusion makes us see a few steps ahead, and which are actually situated back many centuries; appealing in its whole aspect a little too positively to the mind, overexciting it a little, as should not be surprising on the part of a ghost from a buried past; yet there, in our midst, approached, pressed against, touched, motionless, in the sun.

The columns on Saint Mark’s Square are like the spaces between the sentences in a text. The past surfaces in the interstices of the text, rather incongruously, as if in an inviolate subterranean tomb [*comme dans un hypogée inviolé*; from the Latin *hypogenum*, literally meaning “underground”). Just as, according to the same logic, a little of the twelfth century faces the present in the columns: the columns mark the temporal interposition [*elles intercalent*] of the past into the midst of a present public place [*en plein place publique*], but these enclaves of
the past are thin [they are *fines enclaves du passé*], and so the present is forbidden to penetrate [*il est interdit au présent de pénétrer*]—what surfaces in the columns addresses itself “a little too directly to the mind” [*un peu trop directement à l'esprit*]. The columns insert themselves into the present, yet they reserve the inviolate place of the past with all of their “thin thickness” [*de toute leur mince épaisseur*]. The past surfaces in the columns, then, as Proust makes explicit, by a sort of illusion [*une sorte d’illusion*]—a trick that makes us see what we cannot see at all and what in fact cannot be seen at all, namely, time past. (In what the Pléiade editor calls a “corrective note” Proust inserted the specification that this would be like seeing time appear as a color: *la couleur d’une chose qui serait située dans le temps plutôt que dans l’espace.*29) Time would surface by way of this illusion, Proust concludes, as a ghost; or, more precisely, the illusion would make us see the ghost-like return of time enshrouded [*un revenant d’un temps enseveli*]. Once again, according to the paradoxical principle expressed by the “thin thickness” [*mince épaisseur*] of the columns and the surfacing underground (the *hypogenium*) of the space between sentences in a text, time is enshrouded—both hidden or buried and appearing as shroud, as textile fabric into which a body is folded. Time seems to stand out like a shroud in the sun.

What sort of illusion is this? Perhaps an illusion of conservation, not that of body, of depth, of thickness, but of that which fills “days of reading”: those which were lived “fully,” as Proust says at the beginning of his preface to Ruskin, but which “we believe we left without having lived them, those we passed with a favorite book.”30 The quotidian space crossed in this manner is full in the sense spelled out in Proust’s essay: they are full of ephemera with potential to be remembered—remembered not in the sense of conserving some substance of the past, but in the sense of an unfolding or explicating of some fleeting moment that now first appears to divide itself into the future. This is the story of reading that Proust tells, after all, in his essay as a series of interruptions, a story of “days of reading” punctuated by “the game for which a friend would come to fetch us at the most interesting passage; the troublesome bee or sun ray that forced us to lift our eyes from the page or to change position; the provisions for the afternoon snack that we had to take along . . . .”31 If, like the columns on Saint Mark’s Square, these “days of reading” “interrupt” the “empire of later days,” then these interruptions themselves come to unfold as interrupted time—time divided between past and present. This interrupted, divided time is what “fills”
the “days of reading.” Conserved in “Journées de lectures,” then, is a certain temporal divisibility that surfaces by way of a “sort of illusion”: it is not, as Ruskin says, like “gold to be mined in the sun’s very red heart,” but rather like a shroud in the sun—one that, while hardly to be mined, can, it seems, be read, explicated. In the sense that À la recherche du temps perdu explicates in a fictional context the divisibility of time figured here as a solar shroud—as opposed to the solar gold of Ruskin—it may perhaps be understood as a critical response to Ruskin’s theory of aesthetic value on the part of his translator. Proust’s later work would also, however, be an explication of a part of his former self, as Richard Macksey has suggested. Thus the explication of Ruskin would be one in which the content of the English critic’s aesthetic theory becomes subject to a mode of conserving division inseparable from what Proust at one point describes with the natural-scientific figure of cell multiplication:

the parts of the old self that are condemned to die . . . that take fright and refuse, in acts of rebellion which we must recognize to be a secret, partial, tangible and true aspect of our resistance to death, of the long, desperate, daily resistance to the fragmentary and continuous death that insinuates itself throughout the whole course of our life, detaching from us at each moment shreds [lambeaux] of ourselves, dead matter on which new cells will multiply and grow.35

Paper is the bearer of such “shreds” [lambeaux] of a former self in À la recherche du temps perdu. Or we might say that these lambeaux—from an old French word for “rag”—have paper potential. Indeed at one point, nearly at the end of À la recherche du temps perdu, the image of Ruskin resurfaces in ruminations on paper, specifically the narrator Marcel’s “paperies” [paperoles]. With a complexity equal to that of the passages from “Of Kings’ Treasuries” just examined, this shred of Proust’s former self returns in these ruminations as a figure of stone: the narrator’s work, he tells us, is “not like a cathedral but like a robe [une robe].”34

III.

The appearance of paper late in the extended, highly conflictual critique of Ruskin carried out in À la recherche du temps perdu returns us to the image of paper and to Benjamin. The question of the image [Bild] is in fact the main focus of Benjamin’s 1929 essay on Proust, “The Image of Proust.” Benjamin’s reflections on the image are linked to a virtual theory of aesthetic value, as we will see in a minute
when we trace the occurrence of the word “virtual” [*virtuel*] in Benjamin’s writings of this period. The presence of the theory of energy is clear in Benjamin’s comments on the image in the Proust essay:

Proust was the first to give the nineteenth century a capacity for memories [*memoirenfähig*]. What before him was a period (or a space-time) with no electrical charge [*spannungsloser Zeitraum*] became a force-field [*Kraftfeld*] in which multifarious currents [*Ströme*] were activated by later authors.35

As this observation suggests, Benjamin’s aesthetics are rather openly marked by the language and concerns of natural philosophy. The image of the force-field itself in the Proust essay, for example, reappears at important moments in such major later works by Benjamin as “The Storyteller” (1936) and in a well-known description of “dialectical images” in Convolute N of the posthumously published *Arcades Project*.36 Indeed, in a sense, as the sentences quoted above suggest, the force-field is a signal image of the image in Benjamin’s work, a connection that did not escape his friend and editor, Theodor Adorno.37 The connection of the image to virtuality is also indicated in the Proust essay: the image, Benjamin says, “is released [*es löst sich aus*] from the articulations [*Gefüge*] of Proust’s sentences like the summer day at Balbec—old, immemorial, mummified—from of the tulle curtains under the hands of Françoise.”38 In keeping with the theory of the field, the image is a matter not of substance but of the space between substances. The appearance of the image, in other words, resembles the “sort of illusion” by which the past returns as shroud in the sun at the end of Proust’s “Journées de lecture.” As in Proust’s vision of St. Mark’s Square, the site of this illusion in Benjamin’s essay is interstitial—the image emerges from the articulations (*Gefüge*, from *fügen*, meaning “to join”) in Proust’s sentences— the interstices, again as in Proust, being associated with the woven textile, here the “tulle curtains.” And indeed, folded, as it were, into the curtain image by the insertion of the word “mummy-like” [*mummienhaft*] is also Proust’s image—the shroud—as we discover if we read between the lines of Benjamin’s phrase. For the passage which is not directly quoted from Proust is one in which the image of summer also appears as a shroud in the sun: the scene at the end of *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, in which as Françoise undoes the curtains the image of the summer day is released and appears, not as a substantial body, but as an “extravagantly attired, thousand-year-old mummy in a robe of gold” [*dans sa robe d’or*].39
The conservation that occurs by way of the interstitial “articulations” [Gefüge] of the image is explicitly characterized as “virtual” in Benjamin’s famous essay on translation. “For to some degree all great texts, and to the highest degree sacred ones,” Benjamin says, “contain between the lines their virtual translation [ihre virtuelle Übersetzung]. The interlinear version of the sacred text is the primal image or ideal of all translation.”

For the translator the original is like an image, a connection doubly significant for Benjamin who was not only the author of “The Image of Proust,” but also Proust’s translator. Indeed, from this perspective, it is entirely fitting that translation in a sense joins the three figures that concern us here: Proust being Ruskin’s translator and Benjamin Proust’s. But our main concern is with the conservation principles at work in translation from Benjamin’s point of view, and specifically with what is at stake in the use of the word “virtual” in the passage just cited. The parallel to Proust’s critique of Ruskin is instructive in the sense that like Proust, and indeed like the Ruskin of Unto This Last, Benjamin is targeting an entrenched substance theory of value with one based on virtuality. For Benjamin this takes the form of a critique of the central category of Hegel’s aesthetics, that of “content” [Gehalt]. But, in keeping with the more dynamic, digraphic conflict we are tracing here, Benjamin does not simply stop using this word. Instead, as with other Hegelian categories—the word “dialectic” is a good example of this—his critical departure is more elusive and veiled.

Nevertheless Benjamin’s use of the word Gehalt gives an inflection to the Hegelian concept of content that derives from his virtual theory of value. The presence of a substance theory of value in Hegel’s aesthetics can be detected in the history of the word Gehalt in German usage. Until the end of the eighteenth century, Gehalt described the amount of precious metal (gold or silver) contained in a coin (dictionaries at the time gave the Latin valor as an equivalent). Hegel, following Schiller it seems, adapted this metaphor to aesthetic theory and employed the term Gehalt to describe the essential substance or kernel of truth in the work of art. Gehalt defines what is essential in art for philosophy according to Hegel. It is, in other words, an index of aesthetic value. This is why Lukács, who wrote an illuminating essay on this topic, speaks of what he labels Hegel’s Gehaltsästhetik, declaring in turn that this focus on the substance of truth, the Gehalt of the work of art, is itself the “hidden and fruitful kernel” [verborgener und fruchtbare Kern] of Hegel’s aesthetics. The Hegelian philosopher occupies the necessary vantage point from which to observe and identify the substance
of truth that exists impurely in the work of art; or, in Ruskin’s words, he is the one who can “crush and smelt” the rock of the work in order to extract its precious metal.45

IV.

The inflection Benjamin gives to this traditional theory of aesthetic value emerges in his use of the word “virtual” in several key passages in his work, which we must consider in more detail in order to appreciate how it might shed light on the image of paper with which we began. The first of these comes in the preface to the study of German Trauerspiel, where the word virtual is also decisive. Here Benjamin employs the word “virtual” explicitly in connection with aesthetic conservation principles in a discussion that refers to Meyerson’s philosophy of science. The first footnote in the Trauerspiel book is in fact to Meyerson’s De l’explication dans les sciences. Like Benjamin’s aesthetic inquiries, Meyerson’s scientific writings were concerned with determining the principles according to which a certain content may be understood to persist in time. And like Benjamin, Meyerson comes to place a certain emphasis on the idea of virtuality. The source for both is Leibniz. This is clear in Benjamin’s case in the comments on Leibniz’s theory of monads in the preface to the Trauerspiel book.46 Both Benjamin and Meyerson are interested in Leibniz’s critique of the substance-based theory of atomism and his elaboration of the “virtual” quality of the monad. As applied to translation, for example, in Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator,” Leibniz’s theory would pose the relationship between translation and original as one of “virtual identity,” which is to say, if we adapt a phrase from Leibniz: the translation is not “expressly contained” (compris expressément) in the original, rather it is contained “virtually” (virtuellement).47 Or, to borrow from Meyerson’s gloss on Leibniz’s phrase: while there is in translation the conservation of a content, the absolute identity of what the translation conserves and what is contained in the original could only be established by “an infinite analysis, such as is to be found in the mind of God. God alone knows such truths a priori . . . while human reason is obliged to arrive at them through the medium of experience. In the latter case, the proposition is no more than virtually identical.”48 For Meyerson such a virtual theory of conservation is central to the history of the natural sciences and to the development of the nineteenth-century concept of energy. Leibniz is crucial to this development because his critique
of Descartes and of the Greek Atomists and his advancement of a theory of the infinite divisibility of matter led in the nineteenth century, by way of Kant and German natural philosophy, to the replacement of a substance-based principle of conservation with one informed by the metaphor of energy and of the force-field.  

Benjamin’s footnote to Meyerson thus suggests a parallel development in the realm of aesthetics, one in which a virtual theory of aesthetic content seeks to replace the equivalent of a substance-based theory of aesthetic value—represented, for example, by Hegel’s way of regarding works of art as reducible to something like the content of precious metal in a coin [Gehalt]. Traces of such an effort can in fact be found very early in Benjamin’s writings on content in aesthetics and well as in his stress on the connections in German between divisibility [Teilbarkeit] and transmissibility [Mitteilbarkeit] in the context of a meditation on the Kantian motif of judgment [Urteil]. Such an interest in divisibility and virtuality comes out clearly in the following passage in the preface to his study of the Baroque Trauerspiel:

The representation [Darstellung] of an idea can under no circumstances be considered successful unless the whole range [Kreis] of possible extremes it contains has been explored [abgeschritten] virtually [virtuell]. This exploration remains virtual [Das Abschreiten bleibt virtuell]. For that which is taken up in the idea . . . only has history as a content [Gehalt], not as an occurrence . . . . The pre- and post-history of [beings that are taken up by the idea] is—as a sign of their having been saved [Rettung] and gathered into the preserve [Gehege] of ideas—not pure history, but natural history. The life of the works and forms which only under this protection [Schutze] unfolds clearly and unobscured by human life is natural life. If this state of being saved in the idea is established, then the presence of the inauthentic—that is, the natural-historical—pre- and post-history is virtual [virtuell].

If ideas are only historical in terms of their content, and if this content can only appear virtually, then the ground for history—what allows history truly to appear and occur—is a virtual background. For ideas come to “life,” as Proust would say, by a “sort of illusion”: as actual “occurrences” emerging from a virtual dimension. The mode of this emergence, Benjamin suggests here, is on the order of a theatrical performance [Darstellung]. Or, recalling the discussion of Platonic anamnesis which leads up to the allusion to Leibniz, ideas become subject to a repetition: they divide themselves out of a virtual space and into what becomes their “pre- and post-history.” Translation, Benjamin suggests in a footnote here, is another way of
describing this repetition or division, in the sense that the original contains a virtual “translatability” [Übersetzbarkeit] realized by the translator.\footnote{53} Indeed, as this allusion to translation indicates, the idea of virtuality is a primal source for Benjamin’s work. It is explored throughout his writings and goes by multiple names: “translatability,” “transmissibility,” “criticizability” [Kritisierbarkeit], “reproducibility” [Reproduzierbarkeit], and “readability” [Lesbarkeit]. An exhaustive exploration of the importance of the passage cited above for the topic of virtuality in Benjamin’s work as a whole is beyond the scope of this essay.\footnote{54} Our main concern is with how virtuality as a principle of conservation informs Benjamin’s theory of the image and, by extension, his citation of the image of paper in the scene from Kafka.

This is the explicit focus of a passage from Benjamin’s essay on Goethe’s Elective Affinities. Here in fact Benjamin offers us an image of virtuality at work in the interaction between critique [Kritik] and aesthetic content [Gehalt]:

Yet an image . . . is perhaps allowed. Let us suppose that one makes the acquaintance of a person who is handsome [schön] and attractive but impenetrable, because he carries a secret within him. It would be reprehensible to want to pry [verwerflich, in ihn dringen zu wollen]. Still it would surely be permissible to inquire [forschen] whether he has any siblings and whether their nature could not perhaps explain somewhat the enigmatic character of the stranger. In just this way critique seeks to discover [forscht] siblings of the work of art. All genuine works have their siblings in the realm of philosophy. It is, after all, precisely these figures in which the ideal of philosophy’s problem appears.\footnote{55}

Benjamin goes on to explicate this image as posing a philosophical question, and it is at this point that the word “virtual” makes an appearance. He begins following up on his image of the impenetrable stranger by stating that there is no question that we can ask that would have as its answer the unity or ideal of philosophy. Like the stranger’s “secret,” such philosophical unity is beyond question—it is both a given and unsusceptible to a direct question. This is where works of art and criticism come in:

Even if, however, the system [of philosophy] is in no sense attainable through inquiry, there are nevertheless constructions [Gebilde] which, without being questions, have the deepest affinity [Affinität] with the ideal of the problem. These are works of art. The work of art does not compete with philosophy itself—it merely enters into the most precise relation to philosophy through its affinity [Verwandtschaft] with the ideal of the problem. And to be sure, according to a lawfulness grounded in the
essence of the ideal as such, the ideal can represent itself [sich darstellen] solely in multiplicity. The ideal of the problem, however, does not appear in a multiplicity of problems. Rather, it lies buried [vergraben] in a multiplicity of works, and its excavation [Förderung] is the business of critique. The latter allows the ideal of the problem to appear in the work of art in one of its manifestations. For critique ultimately shows in the work of art the virtual formulatibility [virtuelle Formulierbarkeit] of the work’s truth content [Wahrheitsgehalt] as the highest philosophical problem . . . . If, therefore, one may say that everything beautiful [Schöne] is connected in some way to the true, and that the virtual site [virtueller Ort] of the true in philosophy is determinable, then this is to say that in every true work of art an appearance of the ideal of the problem can be discovered.56

First of all let us note that the focus in this passage is on criticism in relation to works of art as “constructions” in the sense of the collective form of the German word for “image” [Bild], that is to say, in the same sense that is the subject of the essay on Proust. Works of art, we are told now, are not questions; they are, however, like the non-existent question that would designate philosophy’s problem: they have an “affinity” [Verwandtschaft] with the ideal of the problem of philosophy in the sense of the “elective affinities” [Wahlverwandtschaften] of Goethe’s novel. This “affinity” of artworks to the ideal is grounded in a law according to which the ideal can only be represented [darstell] in multiplicity. Not in a multiplicity of problems, however, but in a multiplicity of works does it appear “buried” [vergraben].

This brings us back to Proust and, before him, Ruskin—to the mummy or the shroud at the end of À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs and to the “gold to be mined in the sun’s very red heart” in Sesame and Lilies; back, in other words, to the image of aesthetic content as the return of a buried appearance. As Benjamin puts it here, the business of criticism is Förderung: “excavation” in the sense of mining—taking something out of the earth—but in this case, more accurately, also “bringing to light” or, closer to the etymology it shares with the English word, “furthering.” For what comes to light here and what is furthered and conserved is identified with nothing substantial; conserved in fact is the very possibility of conservation as such. As Benjamin emphasizes, this conservation (of the possibility of conservation) occurs at a “virtual site” [virtueller Ort]—one that does not itself actually appear but that makes appearance possible. This virtual dimension of possible appearance gives philosophy an opportunity “represent” its “ideal” to criticism. Or, Benjamin says, criticism is able to bring out or conserve a virtual dimension of philosophy. Philoso-
phy would not be capable of representing its ideal without this virtual dimension that is conserved by works of art, by Gebilde. The status of such Gebilde themselves is the subject of the parable: as with Benjamin’s image of the secretive stranger, the work of art itself is impenetrable precisely because it lacks depth, and so we cannot get at its content by the sort of mining operation imagined by Ruskin; it is not a matter here, as Benjamin says, of “wanting to pry” or to penetrate its surface [in ihn dringen zu wollen]—the surface is sealed [verschlossen]. This is indeed the central thesis of the study of Goethe in which this passage appears: Elective Affinities is not, Benjamin insists, about “an ethical problem” or “a social problem,” but about the collapsing of the ethical and the social into an impenetrable, secretive “appearance”: a “dissolution” [Auflösung] in which “everything human turns into appearance” [alles Humane [wird] zur Erscheinung]. As Benjamin points out, this is what Goethe himself described as the work’s “open secret” [offenbares Geheimnis].

The truth content of Goethe’s novella, then, is the disappearance of content as ethical, social, and human depth and its appearance as surface. It is also the coming to light of a virtual surface that makes this appearance possible. For Benjamin in the essay, such a surface presents itself as Goethe’s “technique” in the novella (Benjamin calls it a barrier or boundary [Grenze]). This technique is to be identified not with “Goethe the man,” but with Goethe the narrator [Erzähler]. The idea of aesthetic content [Gehalt] as “technique” itself seems to make an appearance—in the sense of Darstellung—in the final act of Benjamin’s essay. In this scene, Gehalt appears as Haltung: according to Benjamin what the novella holds or bears is, again, not a substance, but a certain bearing, and not that of Goethe the man, but of Goethe the narrator—the one whose “technique” produces collections of images [Gebilde]. For as the “stance” or “bearing” [Haltung] of the narrator “comes to light” [tritt zutage] in this passage from the end of Elective Affinities, and as the curtain goes up on aesthetic content, what appears is in fact another curtain or, more precisely, another shroud. Goethe the narrator, Benjamin tells us, is like Dante the poet in a famous scene of inter-rupted reading from the Inferno, “who after the words of Francesca da Rimini ‘falls like a corpse’” [als fiele eine Leiche]. It is not possible here to elaborate fully on how this scene recalls the network of images we have been pursuing: Benjamin’s evocation of the Proustian image (the mummy-like sun in its robe of gold at the end of À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs), an image that recalls the Ruskinian image at the end of Proust’s “Journées de
lecture” (the enshrouded past surfacing in the sun on Saint Mark’s Square) and ultimately Ruskin’s own image of gold to be mined in the sun’s very red heart in Sesame and Lilies. It seems fitting that the image of Goethe appearing at the end of Benjamin’s essay should bear all these images with it, conserving, as it were, all of these images of conservation.

V.

Aesthetic conservation is the main point of the special theatricality with which the image of Goethe—“the storyteller” [der Erzähler]—comes to light. It is the theatricality of such a gesture that concerns Benjamin in his reflections on Kafka with which we began. The German Gestus and Gebärde, like their English equivalent, “gesture,” derive from the Latin verb gerere meaning “to carry”—in German tragen, as in the verb übertragen: to translate. As a carrying movement, gesture poses the question of value and conservation principles. Meaningfulness is what makes movement a gesture. Thus, as Benjamin points out elsewhere, Freudian psychoanalysis converts fleeting movements into gestures—infinitely small, we would say divisible, movements now become the bearers of obscure meaning. As a result, the everyday takes on a gestural capacity. This is what Benjamin calls “theatrical”: theatricality, he says, “dissolves occurrences into gestic components.”62 Kafka’s theatrical work “represents [darstellt] a codex of gestures”—gestures which, however, “in no way . . . have a certain symbolic meaning for the author but which are broached in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings.”63 In other words, what gesture bears in Kafka’s work is bearing as such, much as what Goethe’s Elective Affinities contains or holds, its Gehalt, is a certain way of holding, Haltung. This explains Benjamin’s preoccupation in his Kafka essay with messengers, heralds, and other assorted bearers of uncertain tidings.64 This preoccupation is announced in fact before we even get to Kafka in the way Benjamin approaches his subject in the essay—Pushkin’s story of Schuwalkin is the “herald” of Kafka’s work, he says. And from this perspective it is more than simply accidental that this heralding involves “Akten” and “Papiere.” For paper acts primarily as a medium, and as such it also involves, and is involved in, questions of bearing. Thus in the case of the parable from Pushkin one could say with the utmost rigor that what the messenger carries unbeknownst to him is a token of his status as bearer—as Schuwalkin, the one who unknowingly bears his name, “Schuwalkin.”
Bearing is the focus of Benjamin’s comments on theatricality when it comes to *The Trial* as well and here too, as we noted at the outset, the issue of paper itself takes on a certain meaning. At some spots in Kafka’s novel, we recall Benjamin saying, K. himself becomes theatrical: “[K.] slowly took one of the papers from the desk without looking at it, laid it on his open hand and raised it up gradually to the gentlemen while himself standing up. In doing so he had no definite purpose, but only acted with the feeling that this was how he would have to conduct himself [sich so verhalten] when he had finished the great petition that was to exonerate him completely.” Like Schuwalkin, K. performs his role as bearer in this scene (content [*Gehalt*] and bearing [*Haltung*] collapse into a way of carrying oneself: *sich so verhalten*). The performance is what is carried out here—there is “no definite purpose” [nichts Bestimmtes] behind it. Such a gesture is, Benjamin says, “the cloudy spot” that Kafka’s stories contain [*die wolkige Stelle in ihrem Innern*]. It is also, we might add, the virtual spot that makes up their aesthetic content. If aesthetic conservation is conserved, and aesthetic bearing is borne, by a virtual surface, then paper in Benjamin’s quotation from *The Trial* would be the image of this surface. Paper here is cited as an image of a “virtual site” that makes appearance possible.

Benjamin returns to this image of paper in his explication of the significance in the novel of the parable “Before the Law,” which is another place where the “cloudy spot” appears. It begins to surface, he says, at the point where one supposes the novel to be “nothing but the unfolded parable” [nichts als die entfaltete Parabel]. The question of what kind of process this unfolding is, however, leads to an explication of this supposition, which is itself rather parabolic: a bud unfolds into a blossom, Benjamin observes, and a boat we teach children to make out of folded paper unfolds into a flat sheet. This second kind of unfolding or explication would be satisfying to the reader who had supposed that the parable “Before the Law” unfolded in *The Trial*, for the reader would then have the “meaning” [Bedeutung] of the novel lying in his open hand. Such a reader might repeat the words of the Assistant-Manager: “I already know everything.” But Kafka’s parable, Benjamin insists, unfolds in the first sense—like the bud unfolds into the blossom. This manner of unfolding, if we explicate a little further, has an interesting twist: now what the reader has lying in his open hand is, not meaning, but only paper. The unfolding that we now behold in *The Trial* is not like an unfolded sheet of paper, but it is like the one represented by K.’s holding of the paper in the scene cited by Benjamin. The reader’s bearing is, in other words, like K.’s.
And indeed this conforms quite well to the experience of reading Kafka’s *The Trial*: an experience of moments when a movement or process we call reading seems to acquire gestural capacity, moments when we feel that we are bearing *Der Prozess*. What occurs at such spots is an explication in the sense not that we have definitively extracted the substantial content of the novel, but that we seem to have explicated something which now first appears to divide itself and to take on a certain capacity to make appearances possible. In this sense, paper becomes an image of a virtual surface that makes possible certain appearances. And, as we noted at the beginning, paper—especially mass-produced paper—made possible a great many things. At some point, paper ceases to be a mere administrative instrument. The scene cited from *The Trial* seems to stage this point as a digraphic metamorphosis: there the cursive medium of ephemera and fleeting functionality takes on a more hieroglyphic character. This is in keeping with Benjamin’s whole approach to Kafka and to modernity. Benjamin is on the lookout for such modern metamorphoses—moments when the merely functional suddenly loses its mere functionality, when cursive media (from the Latin *cursor*—runner or messenger) come to a kind of halt and become images of possibility.

“*Gestures,*” Francis Bacon notes, “are as transitory Hieroglyphics.”

The image of paper in Benjamin’s citation from *The Trial* seems to bear this observation out. It suggests further implications for the study of paper as an image of aesthetic value in the modern period. As Febvre and Martin point out in *The Coming of the Book*, paper constitutes the often overlooked condition of possibility for the phenomenon of print. Or, in the less triumphant words of Paul Kristeller, paper is the nearly exclusive, if from his perspective progressively enfeebled, “bearer [*Träger*] of print.” The significance of this bearing in the wake of what Febvre and Martin describe as the mechanization of paper production in the nineteenth century manifests itself powerfully in the economic and aesthetic history of this period. In this way paper, “with all of its thin thickness,” as Proust would say, becomes a site where issues of conservation principles and explication are densely intertwined. Perhaps, then, in Benjamin’s reading of K.’s gesture we get a glimpse of something like the very subject of paper. For Benjamin’s explication of this gesture leaves us with an image of a reader whose bearing is comparable to K.’s: in this explication the idea of value appears virtually in the image of paper.

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NOTES


3 The relevant English works here would include, in addition to *Bleak House*, Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*, and the satires of paper that appear in Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, and Peacock’s *Paper Money Lyrics*.


11 Some examples here would be, from a neopragmatist perspective, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988); from a British-Marxian point of view, Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: Verso, 1976); from the vantage point of

12 Guillory, xiv and 317.


16 John Ruskin, *Unto This Last and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 180–81. Subsequent references to Ruskin will be made parenthetically to this edition.

17 This has been noted recently with reference to *The Queen of the Air* by Linda Austin, *Practical Ruskin: Economics and Audience in the Late Work* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991), 91.

18 Ruskin returns to this simile between wealth and electricity in another key passage in *Unto This Last*, at the beginning of Essay III, noting: “the action and the counteraction of wealth and poverty, the meeting, face to face, of rich and poor, is just as appointed and necessary a law of that world as the flow of the stream to sea, or the interchange of power among electric clouds . . .” (Ruskin, 191; emphasis added). For an interesting discussion of Ruskin’s ambivalence toward clouds, see Martin A. Danahay, “Matter Out of Place: The Politics of Pollution in Ruskin and Turner,” *Clio*, 21, 1 (Fall 1991), 61–78.

19 The relevant philosophical context, which we will not be able to explore here and which is in any case influences Ruskin only indirectly, could be traced from Kant’s theory of “force” [*Kraft*] and the “divisibility” [*Teilbarkeit*] of matter, especially as developed in the *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft*, and to the important role played by the metaphor of electricity in the writings of Hegel and Marx. See, for example, Kant, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft*, *Werke in zehn Bänden*, vol. 8 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), 49–121 and *Metaphysicae cum geometria tuncae usus in philosophia naturali, cutus specimen i. contient monadologiam physicam, Werke insZehn Bänden*, vol. 1, 554–99; Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 122–23; Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, in *Werke*, vol. 13 (Berlin: Dietz, 1961), 94; *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 94. On the importance of electricity


26 Understanding the fundamental nature of energy, as Hesse says of Maxwell’s electromagnetic theory, requires us “to admit . . . that the ‘reality’ of the field consists in the presence of energy within regions devoid of matter” (Hesse, 212). As Maxwell himself wrote in 1856, criticizing the assumption that electrical currents made up of a series of contiguous particles, “we are proceeding on a different principle, and searching for the explanation of the phenomena, not in the currents alone, but also in the surrounding medium” (“On Faraday’s ‘Electronic State,’” *The Scientific Papers of James Clerk Maxwell*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1966), 193. On Maxwell, see Williams, 121–37.


32 Macksey, especially xliii–liii.


36 “A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force [Kraftfeld] of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body,” Walter Benjamin, “Der Erzähler,” Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 2.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 439; “The Storyteller,” Illuminations, 84; “The pre- and post-history of an historical state of affairs appear on the strength [kraft] of its dialectical presentation in this state of affairs itself. Still more: every dialectically presented historical material content [Sachverhalt] polarizes itself and becomes a force-field [Kraftfeld], in which the division between its pre-history and post-history plays itself out,” Das Passagen-Werk, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), 587.


39 Proust, À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, 630–32; Within a Budding Grove, 1016–18 (translation slightly modified).


41 “Dialectic” is, as several commentators have noticed, far from simply identical with the conventional Hegelian understanding of this term as “reconciliation” or “synthesis.” See Samuel Weber, “Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth, and Allegory in Benjamin’s Origin of the German Mourning Play,” MLN 106:3 (April
Throughout Benjamin’s work, there is something of a repeated attempt to smuggle in his divergent views under the cover of official critical discourse. An example of this is offered by his doctoral dissertation, The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism (published in 1920), about which Benjamin wrote in a letter: “Even though I would never have taken it on without external inducement, my work on the dissertation is not wasted time. What I have been learning from it—that is, insight into the relationship of a truth to history—will of course hardly be at all explicit in the dissertation, but I hope it will be discerned by astute readers” (The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994], 135–56).

J. L. Frisch, for example, in his 1741 Teutsch-lateinisches Wörterbuch, gives valor as the Latin equivalent of Gehalt. The Grimms’ dictionary registers the emergence, in the late eighteenth century, of the application of the term to aesthetics. Under the following general signification of Gehalt: “geholt von münzen . . . was sie an reienen silber, gold, an wirklichen wert in sich helten, enthalten,” the Grimms note the extension of this meaning of Gehalt to aesthetics with Schiller, and in particular with the 1781 preface to The Robbers and the phrase “ein gewisser Gehalt von Geisteskraft” (a certain amount of spiritual power) necessary, according to Schiller, for the adequate reception of the play (Die Räuber, Schillers Werke, vol. 3 [Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1953], 7; an English translation of the passage can be found in Schiller, Works, vol. 2 [Boston: Household, 1884], 136.) A useful historical survey of the word Gehalt is offered by the Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, vol. 3 (Basel: Schwabe and Co. Verlag, 1974), 139–45.


Ruskin, "Of Kings' Treasuries," 262.


"Or il est constant dans la nature des choses, et lors qu’une proposition n’est pas identique, c’est à dire lors que le predicat n’est compris expressément dans le sujet, il faut qu’il y soit compris virtuellement." Discours de métaphysique, Die Philosophische Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, vol. 4 (Berlin, 1875–90), 433; English translation: “Now it is evident that all the predication has some basis in the nature of things and that, when a proposition is not an entity, that is, when the predicate is not explicitly contained in the subject, it must be contained in it virtually,” Discourse on Metaphysics, Philosophical Essays, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 41. Other discussions of virtuality in Leibniz can be found, for example, in a letter in French to Burnet (1707) (Philosophische Schriften, vol. 3, 315), in an untitled Latin fragment from 1679 on proof (Philosophische Schriften, vol. 7, 300) and in sections 40, 43, and 54 in the Monadology. Of interest here are several studies of Leibniz that are contemporary with Benjamin’s work and that deal with virtuality: on virtuality as a mode of conservation and identity in Leibniz, see Meyerson, Du Cheminement de la pensée,
vol. 1, 266–68; and on virtuality and infinite divisibility, see Léon Brunschvicg, Les Étapes de la philosophie mathématique (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1912), 201–04. For a perceptive critical assessment of Leibniz (contemporary with Benjamin’s Trauerspiel study) in the context of the German Baroque and in German academic philosophy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Hermann Schmalenbach, Leibniz (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1921), 10–18 on the Baroque (of special interest are Schmalenbach’s comments on continuity as “task” [Aufgabe] in Leibniz [462–65], which is to be compared with Benjamin’s characterization of the continuity or conservation effected by translation as a “task” [Aufgabe]). One further point on Benjamin and Leibniz: though the editors of the Selected Writings, vol. 1 have assigned this little (perhaps insufficient) importance (see p. 502), Benjamin’s professor and dissertation advisor, Richard Herbertz, published a study dealing with what we here might call the virtuality of unconscious ideas in Leibniz. Herbertz’s discussion of Leibniz’s theory of petites perceptions—perceptions divisible into infinitely small parts not registerable immediately to consciousness—would be worth comparing to Benjamin’s own reflections on similar perceptions in his work on Baudelaire (see, for example, Richard Herbertz, Die Lehre vom Unbewussten im System des Leibniz [Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1905], 47–51).

48 Meyerson, Du Cheminement, vol. 1, p. 267. The virtual identity or equality (Gleichheit) of aesthetic works to Urbilder is the subject of Benjamin’s discussion of Gehalt in the final chapter of his Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik, 105–6; Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism, 179–80. Benjamin’s unfulfilled aim of writing a doctoral thesis on the unendliche Aufgabe in Kant is reported in Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 6, 663–65; fragments of considerable relevance to our discussion here are published on pages 51–53; in this same vein, see also the fragment on identity at pages 27–28 (a translation of the latter appears in Selected Writings, vol. 1, 75–77).


52 Throughout this passage Benjamin speaks repeatedly of the appearance of truth as ideas in terms of division, splitting, dispersal: “The sundering [Sonderung] of truth from the context of cognition defines the idea as being” (Ursprung, 12; Origin, 30); “The researcher arranges the world with a view to its dispersal [Zerstreung] in the realm of ideas, in that he divides [aufteilt] it from within into concepts” (Ursprung, 14; Origin, 32; translations modified).

53 Benjamin’s note occurs at the end of the sentence: “The life of the works and forms which in this preservation unfold clearly and unclouded by human life is natural life.” The similarity to Leibniz is suggested by the following, for example: “One might, for example, speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it . . . such a predicate would not imply a falsehood but merely a claim unfulfilled by men, and probably also a reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God’s remembrance. Analogously, the translatability of linguistic creations [Gebilde] ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them” (Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” 10; “The Task of the Translator,” Selected Writings, vol. 1, 254). The collective form of “image” here—
We Artaud, Proust’s ‘episodic’ technique. The theatricality of the bearers—Galeotto, ‘the go-between’—in this scene links this reference to Benjamin’s remarks on Mittler in Goethe’s novella and on middlemen in Kafka. We will come back to the latter. On the ‘corpse-poetry’ [Leichenpoesie] of Baroque allegory, see Benjamin, Ursprung, 194; Origin, 218.

Benjamin, ‘Kafka,’” 418; “Kafka,” Illuminations, 120.

Benjamin associates such figures with that of the fool later in the essay, saying “one can see that fools [Narren] are akin to the indefatigable assistants” (Ibid., 434; 136). The fool is the subject of Benjamin’s letter to his friend Gershom Scholem.


67 This analogy to the transformation of bud to blossom may derive from one of Aristotle’s examples (in the Physics) for his theory of movement as “potential.” This suggests once again what I have been stressing throughout, namely, a possible link between Benjamin’s theory of aesthetic conservation or value and the emergence of the metaphor of energy from the Aristotelian natural science. On Aristotle’s example, see Elkana, 22–23. The analogy of potential to the implication of the blossom in the bud is also used by Benjamin to describe the gestural character of original works for their translators—the original’s bearing that cannot be borne over or translated [übertragen] into the language of the translation. See “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” 14–15; “The Task of the Translator,” 75. It is also a crux in his late study of nineteenth-century Paris; see Walter Benjamin, Das Passagen-Werk, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), 577.


69 “Ce que nous appelons l’industrie typographique”—d’une expression qui justifie pour nous la mécanisation de l’imprimerie à partir du dix-neuvième siècle—était, dès sa naissance sous forme d’artisanat tributaire d’une matière première en l’absence de quoi rien n’était possible dans son domaine: nous voulons dire le papier” (Febvre and Martin, 26). André Blum also makes this point when he notes that the rise of paper preceded and made possible that of printing (see Blum, 14).

70 Paul Kristeller, Kupferstich und Holzschnitt in vier Jahrhunderten, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1911), 12.