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On the Ruins of Babel

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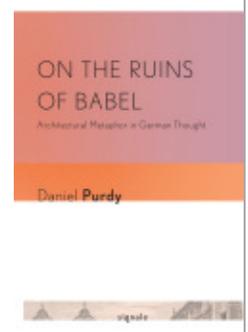
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Benjamin's Mythic Architecture

Walter Benjamin's physiognomy of modern industrial cities builds on the architectonic model of correspondences between buildings and humans. It intensifies the Renaissance's particular emphasis on the facade as parallel to the face, while allowing for many more differentiations in appearance and function than classical architectonics, which always presumed the existence of a single ideal type. Kant, Goethe, and Descartes also presumed a correspondence between buildings and human character, but they began to break it down into varieties. Benjamin organized buildings into many industrial types, of which the arcade was but one, particularly representative, case. Classical theory, as the Enlightenment critics pointed out, allowed for only a handful of differences, with almost no allowance for structures that did not represent an institution. Benjamin's focus on urban physiognomy was deliberately aimed away from the monumental and the organically unified structure, toward the forgotten, the superseded, and the mundane. Tellingly, the most grandiose building he describes in his autobiographical essay, *Berlin Chronicle*, was his *Gymnasium*, for which he emits little affection.

Recent scholarship has examined Benjamin's investment in the doctrines, materials, and techniques of modernist architecture.¹ Here I wish to show how

1. Detlef Mertins, "The Enticing and Threatening Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass," *Assemblage* 29 (1996): 6–23; Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter*

Benjamin's writing responds to the German philosophical appropriation of Renaissance theory.² From the start, Enlightenment revolutionaries looked back to the Vitruvian history of building to uncover a new genealogy of construction. This process began before the French Revolution but became more than a theoretical debate with the emergence of industrial technology. Walter Benjamin accepted Sigfried Giedion's claim that modern architecture began with the mundane bridges, tunnels, factories, and sewers of early industry. For Benjamin, Giedion was the theorist who most directly connected the nineteenth century's material history with high modernist architecture. Both Detlef Mertins and Susan Buck-Morss have shown that Giedion's *Building in France* provided the architectural historical narrative that informs much of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*.³ There are strong similarities between Giedion's work and the *Arcades Project's* method of linking technology with cultural formations. Giedion extended the old correspondence between building and consciousness into the modern era, not only by historicizing it as a narrative but also by linking industrial construction with the repressed contents of the unconscious. His account of the nineteenth century bifurcated architecture between style-driven facades and practical engineering: "Construction in the nineteenth century plays the role of the sub-conscious. Outwardly, construction still boasts the old pathos; underneath concealed behind facades, the basis of our present existence is taking shape."⁴ This unconscious, unrecognized, and unaesthetic manner of building constitutes the actual site of meaning in modern architecture: "If we extract from that century those elements that live within us and are alive, we see with surprise that we have forgotten our own particular development—if you will our TRADITION." Giedion argues that the questions of industrial engineering have always been present but have remained invisible, and in that sense they are comparable to the discovery of the unconscious, which seemed at the turn of the century to have always been active without acknowledgment. He provides Benjamin with an alternative model of the Marxist base-superstructure opposition, one that interprets material history psychoanalytically. Even his metaphors anticipate Benjamin's: "Brushing aside the decades of accumulated dust atop the journals, we notice that the questions that concern us today have persisted in unsettled discussion for more than a century."⁵

Bauhaus Modernism gleamed as a utopian prospect because it promised to replace the stony tectonics that defined Wilhelminian classicism. Benjamin's enthusiasm

Benjamin and the Arcades Project (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 126–131; Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 173–197; Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 95–118.

2. For another lineage linking Benjamin's *Arcades Project* to idealist aesthetics, see Claudia Brodsky, "Architectural History: Benjamin and Hölderlin," *boundary 2* 30.1 (2003): 143–168.

3. My writing is indebted to Susan Buck-Morss's seminar on Benjamin in more ways than I can recount.

4. Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferro-Concrete*, trans. J. Duncan Berry (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995), 87.

5. *Ibid.*, 86.

for glass and steel construction was matched by his eagerness to escape the *Altbau* construction of the nineteenth century. To understand the liberation implied by new construction techniques, we need to examine how Benjamin was entangled in older modes of architectural perception and habitation. Already in his earliest writings, he employs architectural concepts and images to represent both the operation of memory and the grip of mythology on critical thought. Architectural figurations had both a collective and an individual connotation. Giedion provides a distinctly antihistoricist reading of architectural history. Speaking in rhetorical terms that Benjamin would adopt later, Giedion explains: "The task of the historian is first to recognize the seeds and to indicate—across all layers of debris—the continuity of development. The historian, unfortunately, has used the perspective of his occupation to give eternal legitimation to the past and thereby kill the future, or at least obstruct its development. Today the historian's task appears to be the opposite: to extract from the vast complexity of the past those elements that will be the point of departure for the future."⁶ Giedion here sounds almost like Benjamin in "The Theses on the Philosophy of History," in his manifesto-like statements about the architectural historian's obligation to read the past in order to enable a revolutionary future: "In every field the nineteenth century cloaked each new invention with historicizing masks."⁷

Benjamin writes within the philosophical tradition that compares individual consciousness with the organization of a house, while also reading buildings as concrete markers of cultural history. In the first notes for his *Arcades Project*, he refers to "architecture as the most important testimony to latent 'mythology.'"⁸ Most readers understandably concentrate on Paris and its arcades, for in the next sentence Benjamin states unequivocally: "And the most important architecture of the nineteenth century is the arcade." I would argue that the luxurious interiors of Benjamin's parents' generation presented an earlier, more troublesome convergence of myth and architecture. These grand nineteenth-century private spaces were saturated with mythological artifacts gathered from distant sites. The Roman figurines on Freud's office desk are but the most famous example of cultic artifacts penetrating the modern interior. These talismans were removed from religious sites to be placed in the home as a sign of the modern European's historical mastery and good taste. The bourgeois German house displayed its historical knowledge even as it built a barrier to secure its privacy. Benjamin deploys architecture, both modern and archaic, against the spatial *Aufhebung* that the sheltered interior implied. His celebration of

6. *Ibid.*, 85.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 834. For the German text, see Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), vol. 5, bk. 2, p. 1002 [hereafter German texts of Benjamin's works in *Gesammelte Schriften* will be cited by volume, book, and page as follows: 5.2: 1002].

glass architecture, and the visibility it imposed on inhabitants, were a fairly unmediated consequence of his revolutionary rage against bourgeois comfort. For all the hostility Benjamin's *Arcades Project* directs against the private rooms of his parents' generation, his short essays on Goethe show that Benjamin's assault against the mythic architecture began not in Paris, but in the most interior recesses of German culture: Goethe's house. If Tiergarten's buildings had not been destroyed in the Second World War, we would surely have a museum today that reconstructs Benjamin's childhood home, allowing readers, as for Freud and Goethe, to more readily imagine the spatial dynamics of Benjamin's early biography.

In this chapter we will examine how Benjamin's archeology of material culture developed from his engagement with Goethe as text and icon. Goethe stands in relation to nineteenth-century bourgeois culture in much the same way that the Paris arcades prefigure capitalism in the early twentieth century. In Benjamin's thinking, Goethe writes and lives before the full-fledged emergence of bourgeois culture, yet in novels such as Goethe's *Elective Affinities* the foundations for the nineteenth century can already be detected. For Benjamin, the mythic connotations of architecture are made explicit in dreams. By reading his dream texts about Goethe's house and then about Paris, we find a thread connecting the labyrinths to each other. In urban contexts, we shall see, the mythic experience of architecture entails a highly subjective distortion of a touristic gaze. The dream sequences of famous buildings are very personal engagements with picture postcard views. At the end of this chapter we will connect the mythic apprehension of architecture with the phenomenological distinctions Benjamin provides in his most famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."⁹ Our ultimate goal will be to return to the question of how humans identify with buildings.

Well before he finds it in Paris, Benjamin draws the archeology metaphor out of *Elective Affinities*. His later psychoanalytical adaptations of architectural terminology find their adumbration in his discussion of myth in Goethe's 1809 novel. In arguing for his thesis that the novel concerns mythological conflicts, rather than the social conventions of the rural aristocracy, Benjamin insistently deploys the architectural/archeological metaphor that he later adapts so readily to a psychoanalytic frame. He characterizes Goethe as the novel's divine architect: "As olympian, he laid the foundation of the work, and with scant words rounded out the dome."¹⁰ Architecture, in the context of Benjamin's reading of the novel, entails a secret knowledge of the interior organization that lies behind the visible facade. Myth in *Elective Affinities* is hardly the sunny euphoria of the Italian journey. Instead, Benjamin

9. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1.2: 471–508; Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullcock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3: 101–133. Many of us still carry around the first English edition in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217–251.

10. Benjamin, *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, in *Selected Writings*, 1: 314; Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1.1: 147.

claims, it is "the dark, deeply self-absorbed, mythic nature that, in speechless rigidity, indwells Goethean artistry."¹¹ Benjamin insists the novel is permeated with hidden meanings, placed there deliberately, yet beyond the immediate comprehension of its author or any of its first readers. This deeper pattern of connections operates below the drama of manners. Even though he does not specifically discuss *Elective Affinities*, Graeme Gilloch aptly describes myth's disturbing violence in Benjamin's reading of Goethe: "Myth involves human powerlessness in the face of unalterable natural laws and the subordination of reason in the face of the blind, uncontrollable forces of the natural environment. Human actions are dominated by the necessities of instinctual drives and desires. In myth, human life is not self-determined or self-governed, but rather subject to fate and the whim of the gods."¹² The archeological logic, which he reads out of the novel, Benjamin applies immediately to Goethe himself. The absence of any sketches, notes, or early drafts of the novel in Goethe's vast archive of papers proves for Benjamin that Goethe had deliberately destroyed them: "The destruction of the drafts, however, speaks more clearly than anything else. For it could hardly be a coincidence that not even a fragment of these was preserved. Rather, the author had evidently quite deliberately destroyed everything that would have revealed the purely constructed technique of the work."¹³ This absence of a philological record justifies Benjamin's insistence on a hidden mythological reading, one that departs notably from the more conventional interpretations that situate the novel within social history. Benjamin's writing follows an architectonic logic: the lack of recorded plans about the novel's organization makes clear (*offenbar*), firstly, that a secret order lies buried within and that Goethe must have destroyed them. Absence is proof of destruction, which justifies the spade-work of a mythological reading that searches out the buried secret, for, as Benjamin states axiomatically, "All mythic meaning strives for secrecy."¹⁴ Respectable literary critics have not perceived how the novel struggles with the fear of death (and the belief in demonic agency), because it was "a struggle he concealed too deeply within himself."¹⁵ *Elective Affinities* stands in poignant contrast to Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. Goethe destroyed his notes and left only the polished novel, whereas for Benjamin's massive work on Paris the case is reversed.

In the first half of *Elective Affinities*, in the scene in which Goethe's four lead characters assemble along with neighbors and local dignitaries for a ceremony to place the foundation stone of Eduard and Charlotte's new country house, the qualities associated with building and commodities are set in relation to each other so

11. Benjamin, *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, 1: 314; Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandschaften*, 1.1: 147.

12. Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 10.

13. Benjamin, *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, 1: 313–314; Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandschaften*, 1.1: 147.

14. Benjamin, *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, 1: 314; Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandschaften*, 1.1: 146.

15. Benjamin, *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, 1: 318; Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandschaften*, 1.1: 152.

that each acquires the traits of the other. The scene opens with an earnest speech about the three conditions required for building a secure structure and ends with the onlookers donating small fashion objects to be included within the time capsule in the foundation.¹⁶ Goethe moves fluidly from the metaphysical reflections of the mason master to the merriment of officers and ladies tossing buttons, hair combs, and necklaces into the vault as memorial tokens. In the dialectical reflections of the mason who leads the ceremony, buildings are described as temporary, and fashion as durable. Within the cornerstone, Eduard has laid coins and wines as precious markers of the moment in which the foundation was laid. The guests are invited to add their own trinkets, and everything from buttons to Otilie's necklace is laid in the stone upon which the house will rest. The mason acknowledges that in this ritual the material signs of permanence and transitoriness are reversed: "We lay this stone for eternity, to secure a long happy life for the present and future owners of this house. But in committing these treasures to the earth so carefully, we emphasize the frailty of human existence! We are also considering that this tightly sealed cover may again be lifted, which could happen only if the whole house, as yet unbuilt, were destroyed." (Wir gründen diesen Stein für ewig, zur Sicherung des längsten Genusses der gegenwärtigen und künftigen Besitzer dieses Hauses. Allein indem wir hier gleichsam einen Schatz vergraben, so denken wir zugleich, bei dem gründlichsten aller Geschäfte, an die Vergänglichkeit der menschlichen Dinge; wir denken uns eine Möglichkeit, daß dieser festversiegelte Deckel wieder aufgehoben werden könne, welches nicht anders geschehen dürfte, als wenn das alles zerstört wäre, was wir noch nicht einmal aufgeführt haben.)¹⁷ Architecture is portrayed as unstable even as it is claimed that it withstands the pressures of nature and history; fashion goods are preserved far beyond their moment to become archaeological artifacts. Goethe's mason articulates the same early modern fatefulness, that all structures are prone to destruction, that informs Kant's awareness that all philosophical systems (*Lehrgebäude*) are prone to critique, revision, and dismemberment. In his *Elective Affinities* essay, Benjamin shows how very closely the speech about foundations is connected to the grave. The mason's ceremonial incantation makes allusions to funerals and weddings. Benjamin follows Goethe's mythical thinking, wherein every new construction requires a sacrificial death. The mason's festive speech befits a funeral even as it celebrates a foundation: "It is an earnest business, and our invitation is an earnest one, for our festivities are carried out in the depths of the earth. Here within this narrowly dug-out space you do us the honor of bearing witness to our mysterious occupation." (Es ist ein ernstes Geschäft

16. Diane Morgan provides an alternate reading of this scene that stresses the connections with Freemasonry. Diane Morgan, *Kant Trouble: The Obscurities of the Enlightened* (London: Routledge, 2000), 36–39.

17. English translation adapted from Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. Elizabeth Mayer and Louise Bogan (New York: Continuum, 1990), 183; Goethe, *Wahlverwandtschaften*, HA 6: 301.

und unsre Einladung ist ernsthaft: denn diese Feierlichkeit wird in der Tiefe begangen. Hier innerhalb dieses engen ausgegrabenen Raums erweisen Sie uns die Ehre als Zeugen unseres geheimnisvollen Geschäftes zu erscheinen.)¹⁸ Every reference to known and familiar meanings also turns toward the hidden and the exceptional. When the mason invokes the familiar connection between architecture and the order of the cosmos, his language also points to secret organizations as much as it revives the Platonism of the Renaissance. Even when the mason adopts the clear classical language of architectural treatises, his speech sounds allegorical, so that his geometrical simplicity acquires a new double meaning. The bright symmetry and orderliness of Palladio takes on an ominous tone in *Elective Affinities*, one that allows Benjamin and subsequent readers to read architecture as concealing a secretive depth, rather than displaying the cosmos openly on its surface. *Elective Affinities* marks a new stage in Goethe's aesthetic, one that now indulges more in the labyrinth that he had previously sought so strenuously to erase. Goethe invites the reader to find the alternative meaning hidden inside the novel when he writes to Carl Friedrich Zelter about his novel as if it were the laden cornerstone: "I have laid much therein, hidden certain things as well. May this open secret bring you satisfaction." (Ich habe viel hineingelegt, manches hinein versteckt. Möge auch Ihnen dies offenbare Geheimnis zur Freude gereichen.)¹⁹ Benjamin, like many literary critics, quotes this letter to Zelter as proof that the reader should be attuned to buried mythological meanings, Benjamin approaches Goethe's novel, and then later the material history of the nineteenth century, sensitive to its previously buried significance. The stark difference between the two writers lies in their attitude toward the secret. Whereas the late Goethe retains a rococo pleasure in the masquerade, Benjamin writes desperately to recover artifacts threatened with oblivion.

Michael Mandelartz interprets the foundation-stone scene as the central moment of self-consciousness, a moment when the novel reflects on its own organization, and I would add that the scene also serves as a template for Benjamin's later historical writing.²⁰ The scene can be read as an allegory of Benjamin's materialist history of the Parisian arcades. Even though, by Benjamin's accounting, the novel describes a distinctly precapitalist society, its truth content concerns not so much the late eighteenth-century rural aristocracy as the mythic, sacrificial forces embedded in marriage and unleashed through divorce. As the novel sets house and marriage parallel to each other it displays their fragility. Benjamin follows the *Maurergeselle's* warning that even as they raise the building, one is compelled to contemplate its demise: "The laying of the foundation stone, the celebration of the raising of the roof beams, and moving in

18. Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, 182; Goethe, HA 6: 300.

19. Goethe, *Briefe*, in *Goethes Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan and Albert Leitzmann (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1896), 4.20: 346.

20. Michael Mandelartz, "Bauen, Erhalten, Zerstören, Versiegeln: Architektur als Kunst in Goethes *Wahlverwandtschaften*," *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 118 (1999): 500–517, here 500.

mark just so many stages of decline.” (Grundsteinlegung, Richtfest und Bewohnung bezeichnen ebensovielen Stufen des Untergangs.)²¹ Behind the novel’s earnest speeches and ironic displacements, Benjamin perceives the movement of myth as a subterranean force in social relations, yet he does not provide a grand thesis about myth and architecture. More circumspectly, he links the cornerstone scene, with its festive speeches and gestures, to larger unseen forces, thereby granting a kind of legitimacy to myth through his quiet, cautious, and almost respectful line of analysis.

Recent scholarship has been very much alive to the importance of archeological tropes in Benjamin’s writing on memory; however, Benjamin’s references to archaic structures have quickly been coupled with nineteenth-century theories of memory and photography.²² Sigrid Weigel notes a shift in Benjamin’s use of spatial images to describe memory from the topographical model of his earliest writings on the Arcades Project in the late 1920s to the more explicit analogies between cityscapes, script, and the unconscious in the Arcades writing of the 1930s.²³ I would suggest that many Benjamin scholars and historians of modernity write and think so thoroughly within an opposition that always defines the modern as radically distinct from the ancient that they do not allow themselves to consider how deeply Benjamin’s memory writing incorporated ancient mnemonic practices. We have to ignore Baudelaire’s insistence that one not devote too much time to antiquity in order to recognize the vast correspondences between Benjamin’s memory writing and the mnemonic tradition that winds its way with many divergences from antiquity into the baroque.

Weigel’s suggestion that psychoanalysis first becomes important for the Arcades Project in the 1930s should not imply that Benjamin’s earliest engagement with architecture overlooked the operations of the unconscious in his attempt to read space. Benjamin’s first architectural dream interpretations did not concern the Parisian arcades so much as the more conventional monuments of nineteenth-century culture. Scattered in smaller, less methodical pieces from the 1920s we find isolated aesthetic interpretations that were later reformulated in grander terms in the 1930s. Out of these short readings we can see the continuities and smoother transitions in Benjamin’s thought. Left out of Weigel’s account of Benjamin’s memory images is any reference to the mnemonic techniques of classical rhetoric. These practices, while “rediscovered” for late twentieth century, would have been preserved earlier in the century through canonical German literature and through the Latin education still prevailing in the Wilhelminian *Gymnasium*. Goethe’s writing, most explicitly *Elective Affinities*, would have provided Benjamin a mediating link between

21. Benjamin, *Goethe’s Elective Affinities*, 308; Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, 1.1: 139.

22. Max Pensky links Benjamin’s Arcades writing to Freud’s famous description of the unconscious as the city of Rome with all its layers of ruins intact: “Walter Benjamin’s Urban Renewal.” *City* 9.2 (2005): 205–213. See also Willi Bolle, *Physiognomy der modernen Metropole: Geschichtsdarstellung bei Walter Benjamin* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1994), 306–352.

23. Sigrid Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1997), 28.

modern theories of subjectivity and the very long mnemonic tradition that traced itself back to Roman rhetoric.

Dream narration in Benjamin operates as a mental exercise of cultural history within space, wherein jarring moments from the past are preserved in specific locations. Benjamin's dreamer moves like Cicero through a building or a city, searching for a crucial forgotten fact. In both recollection and dreaming, the searching subject is given over to involuntary and serendipitous forces. The *Denkbilder* (essays) have been readily linked to baroque allegories, yet these are themselves late manifestations of a longer history of mnemonic practices. Recollections appear in Benjamin's *Berlin Chronicle* in the figure (*Gestalt*) used to place them within thought. Benjamin explains the emergence of these memory figures with much the same emphasis on placing and retrieving as in the rhetoricians: "For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form they have at the moment of commemoration." (Denn wenn auch Monate und Jahre hier auftauchen, so ist es in der Gestalt, die sie im Augenblick des Eingedenkens habe.)²⁴ The phrase "Augenblick des Eingedenkens" (moment of commemoration) is a lyrical form of romantic mnemonics: "Augenblick" as the subjective vision of the poetic subject, "Eingedenken" as the spatial phenomenology of placing something within thought. In *Berlin Chronicle* Benjamin refers to the city as a memory theater, wherein specific locations (*Stellen*) have greater personal importance than others. In his spatial descriptions as well as in his interpretation of lyric poetry, Benjamin shares the twentieth-century aversion to "schöne Stellen," pleasant and familiar passages sought out by tourists.²⁵ The essay enacts the Ciceronian practice of wandering through a familiar city in order to dredge up events and names from memory. Like that rhetorical practice, Benjamin's method arranges the past spatially rather than chronologically. The temporal order is determined by how the reflecting subject moves through the imaginary space, more than by the historical sequence in which incidents occurred. Even Roman mnemonics allow for a highly subjective organization of spatial memory. By the end of this chapter, we will see how Benjamin's insistence on a personal organization of space, which does not reiterate dominant tastes, carries over from his writing about Berlin to his aesthetics of architecture.

Unlike earlier German thinkers who adapted Roman memory experiments, Benjamin prizes the ancient city as labyrinth, whereas Kant, Goethe, and most every other adapter of ancient architecture sought orderliness.²⁶ The vast urban geometry of industrial cities belies the symmetrical harmonies of Vitruvius. Rather than reproducing the sharp corners of a Roman encampment, the modern city, even with its angular, functional logic, is experienced by the pedestrian as chaotic.

24. Benjamin, *Berlin Chronicle*, in *Selected Writings*, 2: 612; Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6: 488.

25. On the rich double meaning of *Stellen* in literature and geography, see Eva Geulen, "Stellen-Lese," *MLN* 116.3 (2001): 475–501.

26. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5.2: 1007.

This double character allows the city to become a more complete representation of human consciousness, one that includes the unconscious. To the extent that the functional and labyrinthine city serves Benjamin as an image of consciousness, we return to the tension between the articulation and accumulation of insights. Kant arranged the a priori categories symmetrically, but Benjamin posits that ordered structures accumulated over time grow into a maze. Benjamin affirms the happenstance history of insight that Kant sought to eliminate with his table of categories. Benjamin's method deploys precisely the circumstantial procedure that Kant objects to in Aristotle's philosophy: "It was an enterprise worthy of an acute thinker like Aristotle to make search for these fundamental concepts. But as he did so on no principle, he merely picked them up as they came his way."²⁷ Benjamin's writing, famously, insists on the unique value of insights picked up along the way.

Within the biographical account of Benjamin's development toward Marxism, *One-Way Street* represents a break from the staid labor of traditional Germanistic scholarship in favor of an avant-garde aphoristic style. In making this assertion, the work presents a motto that reiterates the trope that the self can be treated as a construction project that requires radical renovations, revised plans, and never-before-seen methods of working. True to Sigfried Giedion, Benjamin credits the engineer as the model for this self-reconstruction. Descartes and Goethe, with many in between, admired the architect as a scientific thinker who measured and redesigned material life, and Benjamin extends this lineage. In many ways the modernist insistence on an engineering approach to building reiterates the Enlightenment's strongest political arguments against architecture as a service to princes. Benjamin's presumption that architecture had liberated itself from aesthetics overstates the case, however. In this assumption, he follows Giedion's programmatic statement that "the constructor presses for a design that is both anonymous and collective. He renounces the architect's artistic bombast."²⁸ Benjamin's alliance with modernist engineering can be placed within the long-standing debate over whether architecture belonged to the arts or sciences. In a new twist not found in any previous articulation of the conflict, Benjamin credits a woman, Asja Lacis, with having provided him the answer, that is to say, with having redesigned him. The book's title page reads:

One-Way Street

This street is named
Asja Lacis Street
after her who
as an engineer
cut it through the author

27. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 114 [A81/B107].

28. Giedion, *Building in France*, 94.

Einbahnstraße

Diese Straße heißt

Asja-Lacis-Straße

nach der die sie

als Ingenieur

im Autor durchgebrochen hat²⁹

Unlike the classical architect, who integrates all elements of a project into a coherent whole, Benjamin conceives the modern engineer on the model of Haussmann, the Parisian city planner who tore boulevards through the medieval maze of the city's poorer neighborhoods. Benjamin suggests that he is himself a labyrinth that required an engineer to cut a new thoroughfare through the middle. Benjamin picks up the old Berlin tradition of naming streets not only after politicians, but also after intellectuals and artists. He is the old city, and she the planner who straightened him out. Benjamin credits Lacis with making a Communist out of him, leaving open a comparison between Haussmann's city planning and the wide boulevards Communism would later stretch out. Benjamin's admiration of high modernists, such as Le Corbusier, suggested that tearing out boulevards was not just a matter for nineteenth-century imperialists.³⁰

Much as *One-Way Street* marks a rupture, Benjamin carries with him the architectural mythology of his *Elective Affinities* essay. Already on the second page of *One-Way Street*, Goethe appears to Benjamin in a dream. The third entry of *One-Way Street* has the title "Nr. 113" and is divided into three sections, each with its own title referring to a part of a house: "Souterrain," "Vestibul," "Speisesaal." The three-part structure of this aphorism in *One-Way Street* corresponds neatly to the *Denkbild* Benjamin published in the same year (1928), "Weimar." Benjamin wrote this short, three-part essay as he was revising his entry on Goethe for the *Soviet Encyclopedia*.³¹ He had begun the encyclopedia piece in 1926 and worked on its revisions in 1928. All three pieces, the aphorism in *One-Way Street*, the short *Denkbild*, and the encyclopedia entry, stand in relation to each other, though not because

29. Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, in *Selected Writings*, 1: 444; Benjamin, *Einbahnstraße*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 83.

30. In Konvolut E of the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin quotes Le Corbusier on Haussmann: "Haussmann and the Chamber of Deputies: One day, in an excess of terror, they accused him of having created a desert in the very center of Paris! That desert was the Boulevard Sebastopol." In the full quotation, Corbusier, however, praises Haussmann; he mocks the way in which his own era misunderstood Haussmann. Corbusier argues that today Paris exists because of Haussmann and what was once a desert is not a congested boulevard. He shrugs his shoulders and says: "Such is life." Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning* (New York: Dover, 1987), 156. Benjamin nips the quotation so that Corbusier's casual mockery of nineteenth-century critics of Haussmann is not included. Does Benjamin realize how much Corbusier resembles Haussmann?

31. Susan Buck-Morss recounts how the editors of the *Soviet Encyclopedia* came to reject Benjamin's article. Susan Buck-Morss, *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 387 n. 44.

they present the same ideological account of the poet. As Benjamin writes to Gershom Scholem, the short Weimar *Denkbild* displays the side of his Janus face that turns away from the Soviet regime.³² The essay “Weimar” and the aphorism “Nr. 113” circle around Goethe’s mythic status, whereas the encyclopedia entry presents a cogent biographical narrative that addresses the problem of Goethe’s response to political tensions and events during his lifetime. The encyclopedia piece is not at all reductively ideological. It treats topics that today are familiar to most ordinary scholars, such as Goethe’s relation to the Weimar court, the French Revolution, and modernization. At the time, though, Benjamin was delighted when the editors of the *Soviet Encyclopedia* approached him, because the project was such a slap at the Goethe cult. He reports to Scholem: “The divine impudence of accepting such an assignment appealed to me, and I think I will just pull the appropriate passages out of thin air.”³³ He complains to his friend in Palestine about how uninspired he was to write the encyclopedia entry, his only muse being the editor’s deadline. He describes the assignment as “the unsolvable antinomy of writing up a popular Goethe from a materialist standpoint.”³⁴ The full range of Benjamin’s thoughts about the entry cannot be revealed by the correspondence with Scholem, given that Benjamin tells his friend directly that he has more than face when it comes to writing on Goethe. The letters to Scholem do show that the two friends shared deep knowledge of and esteem for Goethe. Only by reading the three pieces in relation to each other can we sense how Benjamin’s Marxist conversion altered his criticism of the canonical writer. In the aphorism and the *Denkbild*, his leaps in and out of dreams demonstrate his ambivalence toward the house Goethe built.

Eric Downing reads “Nr. 113” as the first instance of Benjamin deploying an archeological metaphor to describe memory, yet I would suggest that this aphorism continues the critical method already used in the *Elective Affinities* essay.³⁵ The neo-classical tradition had long conjoined architecture and archeology, whereas Roman rhetorical mnemonics had always understood recollection as a walk through the storage house of memory. Benjamin couples memory with paternal legacy understood architecturally. Goethe is a figure in the house as well as its architect, yet the tension between destroying the father’s house while unearthing childhood memories within it also defines Goethe’s relationship to his own father, Caspar, and to his childhood home in Frankfurt. *Poetry and Truth* lays out the autobiographical connection between Oedipal conflict, recollection, and architecture that Benjamin here condenses to an aphorism. Like Goethe, Benjamin joins the long line of critical confrontation and mnemonic reconstruction that relies upon the devices of spatial

32. Benjamin to Gerhard Scholem, 14 February 1929, in Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993), 2: 489.

33. Benjamin to Gerhard Scholem, 5 April 1926, in *Briefe*, 1: 416.

34. Benjamin to Gerhard Scholem, 24 May 1928, in *Briefe*, 1: 477.

35. Eric Downing, *After Images: Photography, Archeology, and Psychoanalysis and the Tradition of Bildung* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 188.

imagination. Whereas Goethe mocks his father's renovations of the family house, Benjamin fantasizes about its demolition, a gesture reminiscent of Descartes.

The first line of the *One-Way Street* aphorism refers to rituals that have been forgotten, specifically those involved in laying the foundation under "the house of our lives."³⁶ What antiquities lie buried below? They will be exposed, presumably, now that the house is under attack. Bombs are already breaking down its walls, and an assault is supposed to happen. The subjective modal form of the verb implies that the assault is planned but has yet to happen ("gesturmt werden soll").³⁷ What is "the house of our lives" if not the whole of bourgeois society as Benjamin knew it? The second two sections shift the scene to the Goethehaus in Weimar, adding a specifically literary reference to the phrase. In *One-Way Street* Benjamin deploys rational and political critique against the mythic foundations that he unearthed in his *Elective Affinities* essay. Alluding to the cornerstone scene, Benjamin asks what rituals were used, what sacrifices made, what magic formulas were spoken in laying the foundation to this house. This concern for mythic ritual points to the more sweeping statement in 1940: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."³⁸ After 1945, Theodor Adorno frequently used the term "barbarism" in reference to the Nazis, so that today we read Benjamin's use of the term as prophetic. It also has a broader meaning in his corpus, where he uses "barbarism" to refer to all manner of religions. In "Naples," for instance, Benjamin describes the local inhabitants' Catholic faith as barbaric.³⁹ Thus we need to understand the term as incorporating a range of ritualistic beliefs.⁴⁰ While he opens "Nr. 113" with the intention of dismantling the mythic palace, by the end myth has been found nestling in Benjamin's dream of visiting Goethe's study. The piece moves between grand statements against the operation of myth and its quiet reemergence.

In *One-Way Street*, Benjamin alludes to a specific brutality, namely, the superstition that a building cannot stand long unless a living being has been buried within. In the *Elective Affinities* essay, he refers to the construction sacrifice, the "Bauopfer," which initially was only a wine glass engraved with the letters *E* and *O* but later in the fatal flow of the story becomes Otilie's renunciation. When the glass does not shatter on the cornerstone, Eduard takes it as an affirmation of his love. The delicate glass hurled upward is the material contrast to the buried weightiness of the foundation. Eduard's delight in the wine glass's rescue is readily revealed as a delusion. The spared sacrifice amounts to a false lead. The momentary correspondence

36. Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 445.

37. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 86.

38. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings*, 4: 392; Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1.2: 696.

39. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 307.

40. The valences of Benjamin's use of the term become quite extreme when compared with Carl Schmitt's use of "barbaric." See Horst Bredekamp, "From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999): 262.

between the glass and the lovers does not forebode Eduard's escape from renunciation, for the demonic returns later in the novel to demand the sacrifice left uncompleted.⁴¹ Benjamin does not follow the glass up into the sky; his gaze is fixed on the opening in the ground and on the cornerstone, which will serve a practical function but at this moment in the novel stands as an altar to which the characters must bring their gifts. By allowing his glass to be spared, Eduard runs the risk of not performing the required ritual properly.

Aside from *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin would have known the literary connection between building and sacrifice from Theodor Storm's *Schimmelreiter*. At a crucial point in Storm's novella, the farmers raising a North Sea dyke seek a small animal to seal their construction. American literature of the nineteenth century also provides graphic examples of repressed secrets given bodily form as buried corpses. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" involves an alcoholic who murders his wife and buries her behind a moldy basement wall. The story impressed Charles Baudelaire so much that he began to translate Poe into French. Benjamin himself wrote about Poe's "Man of the Crowd," and he would readily have known Poe's many tales of entombment, including "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Cask of Amontillado," "The Gold Bug," and "The Premature Burial." In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Nathaniel Hawthorne also linked the dread secret of generational sin to a secret panel containing the parchment that revealed all. Hawthorne, like Poe, gave murderous, Gothic dimensions to Balzac's truism, "The secret of a great success for which you are at a loss to account is a crime that has never been found out, because it was properly executed."⁴² Benjamin's reading of Goethe's novel stresses that the trinkets laid in the foundation stand in for a more brutal sacrificial death. Goethe's mason draws the parallel between laying a cornerstone and covering up a crime with the belief that sins are as prone to be uncovered as foundations. Even though Benjamin clearly does not share the mason's belief that hidden vices and virtues are inevitably exposed, the act of foundation brings with it the anxiety or promise of exposure: "But just as the man who has done an evil deed must live in fear lest it come to light some day, so the man who has done good in secret may expect to be rewarded openly. And by the same token, we declare this cornerstone to be a memorial stone as well."⁴³ The laying down of construction work suggests a later digging up of archeology allowing the entire process of building to turn into a metaphor for the future's moral investigations of the present.

Any investigation that dismantles a structure, whether with spades or bombs, confronts a building's architectural solidity. Like E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Rat Krespel*

41. For a potent reading that concentrates on the wine glass as fated object and as a cipher for the work of art, see Christine Lupton, "The Made, the Given, and the Work of Art: A Dialectical Reading of Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandschaften*," *New German Critique* 88 (2003): 165–190.

42. Honoré de Balzac, *Old Goriot [Père Goriot]*, trans. Ellen Marriage (Philadelphia: Gebbie, 1898), 121.

43. Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, 182; Goethe, HA 6: 301.

with his violins, Benjamin understands that in tearing down a house, one learns the secrets of its construction. In the *One-Way Street* aphorism, he couples the critique of culture with the sudden recollection of a forgotten past, in his case the memory of a school friend from his enthusiastic membership in the Youth Movement. Whether this memory represents a trauma, Benjamin does not specify. He implies that he has simply lost touch with the old friend, yet one may wonder whether this unnamed friend is Fritz Heinle, the classmate who committed suicide at the start of World War I. Certainly the assault on the house is one trauma that Benjamin does affirm as necessary, if not inevitable. To reject his youthful commitments is a step in waking from the dream.⁴⁴ The question remains, what artifacts can be recovered as the present is destroyed?

Benjamin's dream moves from the vague "house of culture" to more specific encounters with Goethe's house in Weimar. The text presents two locators, first the title of the subsection, "Vestibule," then "Visit to the Goethe House." Within the dream, the subject does not initially see himself; instead he recognizes nothing more than the space within which he stands. Only in the next line does the disoriented first person arrive to begin the narration: "I cannot remember . . ." (Ich kann mich nicht entsinnen . . .). Benjamin has trouble recalling the interior layout of the Goethehaus, yet the very act of not remembering makes clear that it is quite familiar.⁴⁵ Whereas in "Souterrain" he dredges up memory, in "Vestibule" he represses the spatial order that the subtitles create. The next line pushes him to try again, so he compares Goethe's house to the inside of a school, from which he flees. Given the negative memories of his own schooling in *Berlin Chronicle*, the parallel reinforces Benjamin's troubled relationship to official German culture. At the turn of the twentieth century any German's student's first impression of Goethe would have been that of a poet whose works had to be memorized under threat of punishment.⁴⁶ His flight seems to be stymied by two English ladies and a caretaker, passing figures whose mere presence stops the schoolboy in Benjamin from running down the long corridor. When the caretaker asks him to sign the guest book, he leafs through the pages only to find, like Heinrich von Ofterdingen,

44. "A generation's experience of youth has much in common with the experience of dreams. Its historical configuration is a dream-configuration" (Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 838); "Die Jugenderfahrung einer Generation hat viel gemein mit der Traumerfahrung. Ihre geschichtliche Gestalt ist Traumgestalt" (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5.2: 1006).

45. In her compelling reading of Benjamin's Goethe dream, Lilianne Weissberg suggests that the dreamer has stolen into Goethe's house. Weissberg's interpretation stresses the lack of comfort Jewish writers felt with official German culture, whereas my reading emphasizes how well Benjamin knew the canon. Weissberg's and my interpretations of the Goethe dream approach Benjamin's ambivalent spatialization of culture from opposite directions and thus are quite compatible. See Lilianne Weissberg, "Dining Out: Walter Benjamin Meets Goethe," in *Arche Noah: Die Idee der Kultur im deutsch-jüdischen Diskurs*, ed. Bernhard Greiner and Christoph Schmidt (Freiburg: Rombach, 2002), 249–271.

46. For a brief history of pedagogical punishments associated with Goethe's poetry, see Eckhardt Meyer-Krentler, *Willkomm und Abschied, Herzs Schlag und Peitschenhieb: Goethe—Mörrike—Heine* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1987).

that his name already appears on the page, this time in a child's awkward scrawl. The sequence ends here, leaving the dreamy impression that escape from Goethe and his institutional identity was impossible. Finding one's own name in the book of Goethe does not produce a romantic wonder and delight at the uncanny circularity socialization produces; instead it breaks the dream off with the sense that whatever one wishes to write, even one's own name, has already been entered into the book by the Other.

The last section, "Dining Room" ("Speisesaal"), presents a ceremonial encounter with Goethe that takes on the quality of ritual in response to the remark in the first line that we have forgotten the rituals. Again the spatial location in the house matters. Again the dream seems at odds with the title, for Benjamin finds himself at first in Goethe's workroom. The dream reworks the tourist trip made to the Goethehaus. The restructuring of space conforms to the dreamer's internalization of Goethe. As he rearranges the interior of the Goethehaus, the dreamer constructs a bond with the poet. He adapts features that many visitors experience, such as the long hallway through the rooms on the second floor and the diminutive size of Goethe's writing room. Benjamin writes that in his dream Goethe's writing room was even smaller than the actual one and had only one window. In the travel essay on Weimar, Benjamin notes that the shabbiness of Goethe's room is well known, thus when, in "Nr. 113," the room grows smaller and lowlier than in reality, Benjamin is not contrasting the dream room with the historical one, but rather extending its already familiar qualities. In the encyclopedia article, Benjamin quotes approvingly Goethe's comment to Johann Eckermann that he cannot abide large, ostentatious rooms:

Magnificent buildings and rooms are all right for princes and wealthy men. When you live in them, you feel at ease . . . and want nothing more. This is wholly at odds with my nature. When I live in a splendid house, like the one I had in Karlsbad, I at once become lazy and inactive. A lowlier dwelling, on the other hand, like the wretched room we are in now, a little disorderly in its order, a little gipsy-like—that is the right thing for me; it leaves my inner being with the complete freedom to do what it wishes and to create from within myself.⁴⁷

Eckermann reports the comment directly, so that he includes Goethe's reference to the room within which he and Eckermann are sitting. In "Nr. 113," Benjamin assumes the role of Goethe's secretary by joining him in his dingy room, and like Eckermann, Benjamin waits attentively for the old man to speak, which, in the dream, he never does.

47. "Gespräche mit Eckermann," *Weimarer Ausgabe*, Anhang Gespräche, 7: 36.

Benjamin never mentions entering the room. He sits to the side of the aged Goethe, who interrupts his writing to extend an antique vase as a gift, the kind of object that might have been buried within a cornerstone. Benjamin turns it in his hand, noticing that the room has become unbelievably hot. Delicate and hollow, the vase signifies not only buried antiquity or the wine glass in *Elective Affinities*, but also a phallus passed from the father and master to the patient student. Benjamin turns the vase presumably to see the images painted on it but also to manipulate it. Having received the gift, the dreamer follows Goethe into the neighboring room, where a long table ("eine lange Tafel") has been prepared for Benjamin's relatives. Here the dream draws on the messianic tradition wherein the kingdom of God is described as a great banquet.⁴⁸ The banquet table is laid out as if for a seder. The religious ritual blends into a secular identification with the cultural icon. Parallels appear between God and Goethe, the vase and cup, all dwelling in the "house of our lives," when the aphorism is read alongside Psalm 23:5-6:

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy
shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of
the Lord
my whole life long.

The dream also speaks to the desire for validation in the face of hostile relatives. In 1928 Benjamin was completing his increasingly bitter divorce, moving out of his parental house after his mother's death, and giving up his inheritance. The meal in which he sits "at the right hand" of Goethe promises to impress even the most critical family member. At the end, as Goethe rises with difficulty, Benjamin asks permission to support him. As he takes hold of Goethe's elbow he is overcome with emotions. In the last line Benjamin begins to cry, alluding to the previous dream in which he recognizes his childhood script.

In all three dreams, Benjamin finds himself sunk into childhood passions. Only at the end of the first, does he write from the position of wakefulness, and then specifically to insist that he will live directly against the dream from which he has just awoken. Benjamin well understood he was not the first German-Jewish writer

48. Christianity extends the messianic banquet, as in Matthew 22:1-2: "Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.'"

invested in reading the iconic poet so as to separate him from the cultural propaganda of Wilhelminian Germany, nor was he the first German Jew to dream about winning the poet's approval for his work. His vitriolic attack on Friedrich Gundolf's biography of the poet, and the great energy and many pages he expends on separating his interpretation of *Elective Affinities* from the more biographical readings, demonstrate how difficult it was for many at the turn of the century to escape Goethe's paternal aura. Lilianne Weissberg also turns backward from Benjamin's dream to consider its predecessors. She associates the vase Goethe presents to Benjamin with the antiquities Freud collected on his desk.⁴⁹ In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud recounts his own dream about a friend who complained to him that he had been viciously attacked in an essay written by Goethe.⁵⁰ In the dream, Freud tries to make sense of this accusation by calculating the friend's age in relation to the year the poet died (1832). Once awake, he interprets the dream as having actually been about a young critic who attacked his Berlin colleague and friend Wilhelm Fliess. Reading Freud's account, it becomes obvious that he is quite relieved to have resolved the dream's tension. For Freud, Goethe is an authority figure, who is never challenged during the dream or its analysis; rather, Freud cheerfully cites the dream as absurd. Benjamin has a more personal investment during his dream encounter with Goethe, yet, as in Freud's dream, the poet remains a luminous figure, albeit one that Benjamin separates from official culture.

Benjamin's dream encounter with Goethe lacks the humor and the pointed reversals Heine injects into his imaginary conversation with Frederick Barbarossa in *Germany: A Winter's Tale*; however, it does show a similar desire by a Jewish writer to win the approval of a national icon. Heine only facetiously takes Barbarossa as a potential savior for Germany, but Benjamin quite earnestly handles Goethe as a luminous personage, one he can show off to his own family, presumably so that they will be proud of their boy Walter. Goethe's meal promises Jewish assimilation into German culture. Heine's dream serves a literary device for fantastical confrontations across historical time. The ironic modulation between feudalism and revolutionary democracy drives home the inconsistencies between liberalism and Prussian nationalism. Benjamin's dream has a more confessional quality: its literary stylization appears as self-analysis, rather than plotted dialogue. Hence when he weeps as he aids the aged Goethe, Benjamin presents the embarrassing side of mythology, an adoration common to bookish schoolboys. The aphorism moves from the bombardment of bourgeois culture to the awestruck meeting with Goethe via the memory of his Gymnasium friend and their shared enthusiasms. This dead figure, buried in the foundation, serves as a warning. When Benjamin awakes, he realizes that whoever resides in the house must in no way resemble the old friend.

49. Weissberg, "Dining Out," 251.

50. Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1965), 475-477.

The friend has become the sacrifice required for the adult Benjamin's critical projects. Heine also stages a reversal when he awakes from his dream of Barbarossa, but whereas Benjamin affirms anticonformity in his wakeful state, Heine regrets the revolutionary tone he took with the medieval emperor. Both writers position cultural icons and radical critique as taking place in distinctly opposed states of consciousness. For Heine the dream is revolutionary, for Benjamin wakefulness is.

The architectural layout of the *One-Way Street* aphorism reappears in the short travel essay Benjamin wrote on visiting Weimar. As he reports to various friends, Benjamin made a last-minute decision to stay over in Weimar on his train trip from Frankfurt to Berlin. The resulting essay reads like many quaint travel reports written by big-city Germans stopping off in the provincial home of German literature, a happenstance return to an author one has already read through, but whom one is called upon to revisit for the sake of a writing assignment: "And as I rode past Weimar yesterday, I came upon the idea to stop off there on the return trip, in order to lay eyes on certain Goetheana once more, since in the next weeks I will have to occupy myself with Goethe."⁵¹ Benjamin writes with the casual feuilleton tone that assumes the reader is already acquainted with the place and its myths. It is a commentary on the all-too familiar, a second visit to a place he has not seen in ten years, and which presumably has changed so little that one would find little reason to return, but then sometimes one does. A harmless stop. As with the aphorism, each of the three subsections locates the reader in increasingly more precise movement to the center of Weimar's myth: first, the town's largest hotel and central marketplace, then the entrance to the Goethe-Schiller archive, and, finally, Goethe's study. In the first section Benjamin awakens to hear the preparations for the open-air market in front of Hotel Elefanten. He opens his eyes, listens, goes back to sleep, then rises to watch the activity below his window, which he compares to a ballet staged for mad king Ludwig. The scene is very similar to Hoffmann's "My Cousin's Corner Window," the story Benjamin will later use to trace the literary representation of big-city crowds in Baudelaire. Hoffmann's story involves an invalid writer and his cousin who, with a telescope, track the people shopping in a marketplace in front of the tall building where the writer lives in his garret. Benjamin likewise traces the gathering and dispersion of the market over the course of the morning. Hoffmann's protagonist considers the market "a true representation of life's eternal change. Energetic work and the pleasures of looking drive the mass of humanity together. In just a few winks of an eye, everything seems old and exhausted, the voices that streamed together in the whirling crowd fade away, and the booth announces only too loudly: 'It is no more.'"⁵² When Benjamin leaves his room to enter the market in Weimar, he too notes that the "orgy" of activity that seemed

51. Benjamin to Thankmar von Münchhausen, 31 May 1928, in *Briefe*, 3: 382.

52. E. T. A. Hoffmann, "Des Vettters Eckfenster," in *Späte Werke* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979), 621; the translation is my own.

so fascinating from his window seems mundane on the ground (“nur Tausch und Betrieb”). He concludes that all gifts of the morning are best received at a height, in essence affirming the vantage point of Hoffmann’s protagonist. The marketplace represents the present social condition, small-town business that for Benjamin still lingers in a nineteenth-century mode of exchange. The market is not so much an allegory of capitalism as its origin. It keeps Benjamin from dreaming, it forces him to watch and then to join, although he prefers to retreat to his literary height, like the romantic storyteller.

Benjamin discusses Weimar’s most famous literary texts by entering the building in which they are housed: “In the Goethe and Schiller Archive the stairs, rooms, display cases, and bookshelves are all white.”⁵³ As in the dream entitled “Vestibule,” Benjamin examines the museum that Weimar literature has become. Again he looks at the actual pages with their handwriting. What impressions does one gather while walking through its halls? His response is the witty, ironic suggestion that the vitrines full of delicate manuscripts have the appearance of patients in hospital beds. The comparison of the archive to a hospital leads Benjamin to speculate on the contingency of the manuscripts. Were they not themselves once written in the midst of crisis? Did their existence not teeter on the brink of destruction or fame? Their enshrinement in an official building revives the belief that they were anything but official culture. Just as the second installment of the Goethe dream ends with Benjamin recognizing his own script in the Weimar guest book, the travel essay suggests a truth and a crisis in the handwriting of the manuscript, which the papers’ enshrinement within the archive covers up through its own monumentality.

In the third section Benjamin returns to the kernel of Weimar’s fame, Goethe’s study. He writes as a tourist returning to check his earlier impressions. Nothing one sees in Goethe’s small room is unfamiliar, least of all the room itself: “The primitive nature of Goethe’s study is well known.”⁵⁴ Hoffmann’s “My Cousin’s Corner Window” also confirms the impression made by Goethe’s study, declaring modest writing rooms a convention of poets and writers generally. Hoffmann’s narrator provides the same explanation Goethe offered Eckermann: “It is necessary to mention that my cousin lived fairly high up in a small, low room. He is a writer and this is a tradition among poets. Why have a low ceiling? Because his fantasy flies up high and builds a cheerful dome that reaches up into the blue heavens.”⁵⁵ In the museum, Benjamin finds himself alone in the study for twenty minutes, and he indulges himself by fantasizing backward to what it must have been like to be in the room when Goethe wrote there.⁵⁶ This imaginary projection comes close to

53. Benjamin, “Weimar,” in *Selected Writings*, 2: 149; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 353.

54. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 2: 149; Benjamin, “Weimar,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 4.1: 354.

55. Hoffmann, “Des Veters Eckfenster,” 598; the translation is my own.

56. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), 3: 386.

the historicist thinking he later eschews; thus he disguises the moment in *One-Way Street* as a dream: "But if we could overhear it, we would understand the pattern of existence."⁵⁷ The poet's garret is anything but advanced; it shares more with antiquity than with the "hellish" bourgeois comfort of the nineteenth century. It suggests a quieter world than modern society, a world in which the simple pattern of existence allowed an accumulation of experience to be turned into writing and even the wealthiest suffered physical pain in their daily life.⁵⁸ Goethe's room allows the gathering up of *Erfahrung*, the experience of wisdom, which Benjamin later contrasts to the shocks of modernity. This most hidden of Goethe's rooms has little in common with the bourgeois interiors Benjamin criticized for their stuffy eclecticism and material celebration of the inhabitants. The simple furniture in the study makes clear that Goethe's day revolved around writing and sleeping. His narrow bed stood across from his desk. While he slept, the manuscripts waited for him to return. "Weimar" ends with the poet's sleep, as it had begun with the author's waking. For Benjamin the modern writer cannot presume the kind of correspondence between interior life and social reality that defined Goethe's existence. The modern writer has to transform society, he suggests, in order to produce even the most feeble tones within himself.

The encounters with Goethe's novel and museum were not moments limited to Benjamin's pre-Marxist, academic career. The mythic contemplation of architecture, which these early texts detail, reappears in his writing about Paris. In one of the *Denkbilder* known as "Short Shadows I" Benjamin reviews the dynamic of yearning and disappointment Goethe had also traced in his autobiographical writing about Italy and which Benjamin had rediscovered in his own visit to the Goethehaus. The short paragraph, titled "Too Close," recounts a dream about standing before Notre Dame.⁵⁹ Benjamin's scene of a traveler come from far away to contemplate a famous facade compares readily with Goethe's writing on Strasbourg or Italy. Rather than Rome, Paris is Benjamin's object of fascination, yet in terms of the yearnings the two cities inspired they could have been interchangeable. If Rome was the capital of Christian, imperial Europe, then Paris was the capital of the modernity that shook Europe. Both cities promised a release from Germany. Benjamin writes his dream of Notre Dame within the tradition of Germans writing about their trip south to an idealized city. The title "Too Close" alludes also to the erotic play another Italian exile, Friedrich Nietzsche, describes in an entry of *The Gay Science* entitled "Women and Their Action at a Distance."⁶⁰ The erotic connotations of Benjamin's dream are more like Nietzsche's than Goethe's. Benjamin

57. Benjamin, "Weimar," in *Selected Writings*, 2: 149; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 354.

58. Benjamin, "Weimar," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 355.

59. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 2: 268; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 370.

60. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 123, no. 60.

blends desire with the urge to see Paris. Without stressing the point, he allows the church to take on the qualities of a beloved. Benjamin uses the same phrase in the *Elective Affinities* essay to argue against critics disappointed by his interpretation. They will accuse him, he expects, of having stepped too close to the novel, whereas, he responds, they are merely disappointed not to have rediscovered their dreamy image of the novel in literary criticism.

The Notre Dame piece opens by announcing its status as a dream, in order to provide an alibi for writing about such a touristic moment—standing in front of Notre Dame. Benjamin goes out of his way not to belabor the obvious in his urban sketches. In his travel writing generally, Benjamin holds to his insistence in *Berlin Chronicle* that the city's famous buildings have no resonance for him because he has gazed at them too often. If he is writing about Notre Dame, then it is only because he is not awake, for, as he writes about kitsch, "Dreams are now a shortcut to banality."⁶¹ If Goethe refuses to describe the famous sites in Italy, Benjamin is embarrassed even to mention that he went near them. The paragraph starts with a simple statement of location, the left bank before the cathedral, as if the meaning were already in the placement of the dreamer and the object he sees. Location would be important for the tourist who finally arrives at the spot he has wanted to visit for so long. To have arrived is the simple and banal triumph of the dream. Only after this moment does the dream work commence. The opening is not a grammatical sentence; the subject "I" is added to the location only in the second sentence with the deictic "Da." "Da stand ich," "There stood I," meaning both "I was in front of the Notre Dame" and the simpler variations "I was merely standing there" and "There I had been brought to a standstill." The reader expects the next clause to register the disappointment: "There I stood, when . . ." The insertion of the pronoun "I" starts the complications. The spectator is in the right location but fails to see the church. Such an assertion presumes that the visitor can claim to know what the church looks like. Like any other traveler, he has seen pictures of Notre Dame in anticipation of going there; hence he is able to compare his mental images derived from pictures and drawings with the building before him. The brick building cannot be the signified of "Notre Dame." The word has so much more allure than the architectural structure. Benjamin, like Goethe, confronts the disappointment of arriving at the long-desired site. The church is covered in a wooden casing, *Verschaltung*. The ambiguous term suggests a shell such as might surround a nut. In practical terms it might refer to scaffolding that one finds so often around cathedrals undergoing repairs. The German *Gerüst* would have been the technical term for such a construction platform, and Benjamin uses the term metaphorically in his *Arcades Project*. In this dream, *Verschaltung* gives the vague sense that the church is covered up. What can be seen of the church behind its shell

61. Walter Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," in *Selected Writings*, 2: 3; Benjamin, "Traumkitsch," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2.2: 620.

Benjamin describes with the imagery of a mountain: only the last terraces of its massive form soared over the wooden covering. As many before him have done, Benjamin describes the cathedral as sublime nature. In the next sentence he veers away again from the obvious, insisting that he is overwhelmed not by the object, as would be expected in the discourse of sublimity, but by his own desire for the city of Paris. Benjamin uses the distinctly romantic term for yearning, *Sehnsucht*. Faced with the paradox of being in the place that he desires yet still yearning to see it, he concludes that he made the simple mistake of coming too close to it. The paragraph concludes with the most enigmatic statements, which stand opposite the geographical location of the opening. Benjamin distinguishes between two types of yearning: that which he felt in Paris was not the same as what a picture produces in a spectator. In Paris, in his dream, he was filled with an "unheard-of" desire that nestles only in the name. This desire has already crossed the boundary (*Schwelle*) of the picture, as well as its optical and physical possession. The names "Notre Dame" and "Paris" stand apart from their pictorial representations. They lend their force (*Kraft*) to their images, giving them the status of the beloved. Inversely, the name is the refuge of all pictures, a haven that gives value to the image even when it no longer can depict the place. Benjamin insists that the name is itself outside the world of images—it is *bildlos*.

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" contains Benjamin's most famous formulation of urban perception.⁶² Most commentaries apply the essay's central term, *aura*, to film, photography, and painting; however, Benjamin first raised the question of how technology alters perception in relation to the typical Renaissance villa and its view six years before he wrote the "Work of Art" essay.⁶³ If we trace the emergence of Benjamin's key terms, we can more completely understand architecture's importance in distinguishing modern experience from earlier modes, particularly the pastoral villa. A key aphorism, "Poverty Always Has to Foot the Bill" (*Armut hat immer das Nachsehen*), written in 1929, also appeared in the same "Short Shadows" collection as the dream of Notre Dame.⁶⁴ These few dense lines set the stage for the later comparisons between architecture, nature, and photography. The luxurious view afforded the inhabitant of a Renaissance villa serves as the paradigmatic example of auratic perception. Architecture, sculpture, and painting conjoin in the ideal villa. The most famous villas include works by masters in all the genres. Palladio's Villa Barbaro at Maser included paintings by Paulo Veronese and sculptures by Alessandro Vittoria. The paintings and sculptures of a villa are not merely housed within the structure; they are fully integrated within its plan, so that, for example, frescoes of mythological landscapes on the

62. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1.2: 471–508.

63. For a useful discussion of Benjamin's comments on architecture, which, however, does not discuss the "Work of Art" essay, see Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*, 95–118.

64. Benjamin, *Selected Works*, 2: 269; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 370.

walls of a room orient the inhabitant's view out the window onto the valley that almost inevitably surrounds the most famous villas. The paintings, which surround the windows of the Villa Maser, create a sequence of landscapes in which the actual environment is but one of several idealized images of nature. While many villas had some relationship with local agriculture, either functionally as a source of income for their owner or symbolically through idyllic representations celebrating rural patriarchy, the Villa Rotunda was intended exclusively for the entertainment and pleasure of its owner.⁶⁵ Goethe notes that its grandiose rooms and porticoes would make it less than a comfortable residence.⁶⁶ Critical art historians have recounted how the Renaissance villa's vistas reinforce the prestige and power of an urban ruling elite.⁶⁷ James Ackerman notes that in order to understand how a villa responds to its surroundings one must consider not only how the facade and overall arrangement integrate with the landscape, but also how the internal organization and decoration of the rooms constitute an image of the outside world.⁶⁸ Put simply, the villa was not only meant to be viewed, but just as importantly it provided an ideal perspective onto the world. In its exclusivity the villa constitutes the antithesis of art for the masses. Its very purpose was seclusion from the urban populace, in that sense that it embodied the aesthetic perception most challenged by industrial technology. Without the pressures of city life, the villa would be unthinkable. The ideology of the villa depends on it embodying the antithesis of urban values.⁶⁹

Benjamin picks up on Goethe's discomfort with the Italian villa's command over nature. But, unlike Goethe, he does not consider the perception granted to the villa's inhabitant an *individual* concern; rather he frames it in explicitly class terms. Nature, he argues, may provide beauty and solace to vagabonds and beggars, but its greatest splendors are offered up to the rich who sit behind the broad windows of their cool salons: "This is the inexorable truth that the Italian villa teaches anyone entering its gates for the first time in order to take a view of lake and mountains—a view next to which everything he has seen outside pales, like a Kodak photograph next to the work of a Leonardo." (Das ist die unerbittliche Wahrheit, die die italienische Villa den lehret, der zum ersten Male durch ihre Pforten trat, um einen Blick auf See und Gebirge zu werfen, vor dem, was er dort draußen gesehen hat,

65. Robert Tavernor, *Palladio and Palladianism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), 78–80.

66. "Inwendig kann man es wohnbar, aber nicht wöhnlich nennen. Der Saal ist von der schönsten Proportionen, die Zimmer auch; aber zu den Bedürfnissen eines Sommeraufenthalts einer vorehmen Familie würden sie kaum hinreichen." Goethe, HA 11: 55.

67. James Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 10–13; Reinhard Bentmann and Michael Müller, *Die Villa als Herrschaftsarchitektur: Versuch einer kunst- und sozialgeschichtlichen Analyse*, 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1992).

68. Ackerman, *Villa*, 26.

69. *Ibid.*, 9.

verblaßt wie das Kodakbildchen vor dem Werk eines Leonardo.)⁷⁰ Benjamin presents the scenario ironically by stating that it is nature that offers the rich a view, rather than that it is the rich who take the view. This ironic tone calls attention to how “natural” nature seems from the villa, as if the view were not constructed by the architect and the property owner. Benjamin equates the villa’s view with the power, force, and presence of a Renaissance painting. In this case auratic art, in the form of the villa and the masterpiece, overwhelms photography. When standing inside the villa, aura is affirmed absolutely. The viewer sees nature out the window as if it had been placed there by God’s hand: “Indeed, the landscape hangs for him in the window frame, and only for him has God’s master hand added His signature.”⁷¹ Here we have a striking reversal of Benjamin’s argument that photographic technology vitiates the unique presence of art. In front of the actual painting or within the exclusive position of the villa, the viewer is positioned as a premodern spectator, thereby vitiating the success of film and photography. The view from the villa seems unmediated; no image stands between the observer and beauty; there is no need for copies or any technological approaches to reality because it stands in its Edenic form just outside the window. Architecture, the placement of the building and the window, is the technology that enables this ideal and exclusive spectatorship, yet as both Goethe and Benjamin note, the first-time viewer does seem to notice the structural frame of the vision. This illusion of nature presented with all its bounty is precisely the effect that the villa’s design strives for.

The perceptual difference between perspectival grandeur and urban compactness was well known in the Renaissance. Palladio’s most famous villas were meant both to be admired from a distance and to present residents a view into a landscape.⁷² In contrast, his urban palazzi stand on narrow streets that do not allow a view of the entire building. One almost presses up against the palazzi as one walks past, whereas the villas (and some churches) present observers a single, coherent image. In the “Work of Art” essay, Walter Benjamin takes up this contrast as a fundamental distinction between classical and modern appropriations of architecture. Benjamin describes aura as the perception of an attribute in the object that in fact is generated by the perceiving subject. Aura is experienced as if it were a quality belonging to the object, yet the point of Benjamin’s history is to demonstrate that this appearance is conditioned by specific technological and economic conditions. In his early drafts of the *Arcades Project* Benjamin describes Haussmann’s restructuring of Paris as similar to Pope Alexander’s plans for reconstructing Rome—in order to create undisturbed, long-range vistas onto urban monuments: “The Arc

70. Walter Benjamin, “Poverty Always Has to Foot the Bill,” in *Selected Writings*, 2: 269; Benjamin, “Armut hat immer das Nachsehen,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 370.

71. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 2: 269; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 370.

72. Paul Holberton, *Palladio's Villas: Life in the Renaissance Countryside* (London: John Murray, 1990), 111–128.

de Triumphe, the Sacré Coeur, and even the Pantheon appear, from a distance, like images hovering above the ground and opening, architecturally, a *fata morgana*. Baron Haussmann, when he undertook to transform Paris . . . was intoxicated with these perspectives and wanted to multiply them wherever possible.⁷³ Through mirrors and windows the arcade reproduces open perspectives within the narrower space of a long hallway.

The destruction of the World Trade Center provides a more potent example of the distinction between haptic and visual approaches to architecture. Before the attack, the Twin Towers were blank images perceived in distant shots of Manhattan, a view for postcards and establishing shots in television shows. Up close, they were almost impossible to see as an entirety. They were certainly not perceived as mythic double monuments by those who lived and worked around them. The majority of city residents experienced them by moving bodily through their spaces, not by gazing at them. Survivors and mourners all referred to the place within the Trade Center where people worked and died—specifically the floor and the Tower. The trauma of the Towers' destruction appeared as shocking images replayed on television repeatedly until by consensus they disappeared from all screens. The visual shock of seeing such massive buildings burning and falling apart was given bodily significance by the testimony of those who were in the buildings, those who could not watch the fire, but only run from it. This haptic experience lends an overwhelming authenticity to the image. Distant viewers shared in the physical trauma through their empathetic identification with the Towers' inhabitants. Seen on their own without the bodily identification, the burning Towers would have been comparable to images in any number of catastrophe films, which trade on the shock of seeing familiar landmarks destroyed but which have a cold, technical feel, as they are only special effects, and thus lacking in any tactile significance. The haptic experience of architecture comes closest to the mythological effects of construction and destruction that Benjamin traces in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* and that were so potently unleashed by the World Trade Center attack.

Benjamin gives precedence to the habitual mode of understanding architecture as a contrast to the touristic understanding of buildings, which emphasizes their art historical character, their style, and their importance in the development of art. Imbedded in Benjamin's account of tactile perception is a preference for the consciousness of people who work in and around buildings, rather than that of those who contemplate them with an eye toward mastery, either stylistic or economic. Giedion also moves away from the individualistic account of architectural history in favor of the mundane social. Like Benjamin, he maps the opposition in such a way that the collective and the labyrinthine correspond to the unconscious: "Like hardly any age before, all actions were labeled 'individualistic' (the ego, Nation,

73. Benjamin, "Paris Arcades II," *Arcades Project*, 877; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5.2: 1049.

Art), but underground, within disdained everyday fields, it had to create the elements of collective design, as in a frenzy."⁷⁴ As much as government buildings were intended to impose a sense of awe on viewers, to make a strong impression upon first viewing, they lose their grandeur for those who live and work around them. The perception of ordinary inhabitants and neighbors becomes an example of unauratic appropriation. Here the reproduction of an image has nothing to do with technology; rather it is daily contact that breeds the familiarity that wears away aura. The surest sign of an urban dweller is his disregard for the buildings on his street; only an out-of-towner would stand looking in front of a building. Furthermore, the speed of urban traffic obliterates sidewalk contemplation while the chaos makes concentrated focus impossible.

Benjamin's misappreciation of the tourist's perspective is by no means unique. Tourists have always been mocked or taken advantage of; almost every tourist knows the perils of being taken for one. In one of his 1896 Berlin letters, Alfred Kerr gave a ironic list of how to tell foreigners from locals: "Even in the manner of walking one recognizes the strangers. They proceed with faces raised high and seem to always be checking if everything is in order on the roofs of houses. The native Berliners usually drag their gaze along in the dust. They avoid the wasteful expenditure of energy required to turn the ocular muscles upwards. The native-born Berliner does not contemplate department store windows with religious intensity. The native Berliner does not memorize the names of streets by heart."⁷⁵ This disregard for municipal organization is not just a characteristic of the modern urban dweller. In the essay "Naples," which Benjamin wrote with Asja Lacin, the same distinction between northern tourists and natives appears:⁷⁶ "No one orients himself by house numbers. Shops, wells and churches are the reference points—and not always simple ones. For the typical Neapolitan church does not ostentatiously occupy a vast square, visible from afar, with transepts, gallery, and dome. It is hidden, built in. . . . The stranger passes it by."⁷⁷ Naples lacks the clearly marked spaces of Rome that foreign travelers expect in order to enjoy the vista of famous buildings. Benjamin characterizes the disoriented northern tourist as a blind man wandering through the streets with his hands, rather than his eyes, as a guide: "The traveling citizen who gropes his way as far as Rome from one work of art to the next, as if along a stockade, loses his nerve in Naples."⁷⁸ Indeed, Goethe was clearly one of those travelers who favored the open spaces of Rome precisely because they

74. Giedion, *Building in France*, 99.

75. Alfred Kerr, "Die Fremden kommen" (June 14, 1896), in *Mein Berlin, Schauplätze einer Metropole* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2002), 105.

76. Susan Buck-Morss stressed the importance of Naples in Benjamin's development toward the Arcades Project in *Dialectics of Seeing*, 26–27. Graeme Gilloch elaborates upon and critiques Buck-Morss's analysis in *Myth and Metropolis*, 21–36.

77. Walter Benjamin, "Naples," in *Selected Writings*, 1: 416; Benjamin, "Neapel," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 309–311.

78. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 1: 414; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 306.

allow for painterly contemplation.⁷⁹ Upon arriving in Sicily, Goethe comments immediately on the disturbing similarities between Palermo and Naples: “We explored the city thoroughly. The architecture is similar to that of Naples, but the public monuments—the fountains, for instance—are even further removed from the canons of good taste. There is no instinctive feeling for art here, as there is in Rome, to set a standard. The monuments owe their existence and their form to accidental circumstances.”⁸⁰ This passage stands in sharp contrast to Goethe’s enthusiasm for Vicenza, where he also reported his impressions of the local architecture upon first arrival. The possibility for a reverie before a singular building is made impossible by the chaotic arrangement of the urban landscape. Naples and Palermo frustrate Goethe’s urge to fixate on a single structure as the expression of a solitary artist. Benjamin moved in the reverse direction: from Capri to Naples, then north to Rome and Florence. The southern city makes the strongest impression on Benjamin, hampering his feel for the cosmopolitan center. He writes to Scholem: “Even after moving to Rome I have not taken my leave from Naples. After the extreme temperament of Neapolitan city life, the moderated cosmopolitanism of Rome left me cold. Only now do I appreciate how oriental Naples is.”⁸¹

Within the context of Benjamin’s argument about art’s aura and its demise through modern technology, the tactile approach to architecture serves as an example of unauratic perception.⁸² The tactile perception of modern urban dwellers correlates to the same population’s distracted viewing of film. Within the polarities of Benjamin’s larger thesis about aura, the local, tactile perception of architecture is aligned with the surgeon’s perspective on the human body. Local residents penetrate into corners of cities that few tourists even recognize, yet this perception, because it passes so closely to objects, does not provide a painterly view of entire buildings.⁸³

79. Still, Goethe’s spectatorship cannot be reduced to that of a typical tourist. The recognition of foreign visitors as such was a concern in the eighteenth century. Goethe, while first traveling in Italy, sheds his northern clothes in order to walk around unnoticed. Nor should one presume that touristic viewing was always just superficial. Tourists go out of their way not to seem shallow. Indeed, they are quite capable of avoiding the antitourist bias as a means of distinguishing themselves from other, less dedicated tourists. After a few weeks in Italy, Goethe separated himself from other northerners, whom he observed looking at a building or painting just long enough to report back home that they had seen it.

80. J. W. Goethe, *Italian Journey*, trans. W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (London: Penguin, 1970), 231; Goethe, HA 11: 234–235.

81. Benjamin, *Briefe*, I: 362.

82. In the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin states that architecture was the earliest form to liberate itself from the conventions of art. Benjamin is writing from the perspective of modern functionalism, yet the debate over architecture’s status as fine art or a mechanical art is as long as the history of the field: “Die Architektur [ist] ... am frühesten dem Begriffe der Kunst historisch erwachsen, oder besser gesagt ... sie [vertrug] am wenigsten die Betrachtung als ‘Kunst,’ die das 19. Jahrhundert, im Grunde mit nicht viel größerer Berechtigung in einem vordem ungeahnten Maße den Erzeugnissen geistiger Produktivität aufgezwungen hat.” Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5.1: 217 [F3,1].

83. K. Michael Hays uses Benjamin’s distinctions between the painter and the camera, the magician and the surgeon, in order to distinguish different tendencies in the Bauhaus school. K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 132–133.

The localized perspective eschews the vistas required to appreciate the proportions and organic unity of classical architecture in favor of the worm's glance. Benjamin reverses the valences of the classical distinction between the architectonic and the accumulative, giving greater historical significance to the street-level perception. Within the context of industrial cities, this reversal reflects the common experience of residents, who engage with architecture only to the extent that it surrounds their working day.

Much has been written about Benjamin's strategy of losing himself in a city as if it were a forest. In Berlin the art of disorienting oneself challenges Benjamin, for he knows the city intimately. Only in Paris did he learn how to wander aimlessly while never truly being lost. In the autobiographical essay *Berlin Chronicle*, written in 1932, he contrasts wandering with the banal problem of simply not knowing where one is:

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance—nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—this calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passersby, roofs, kiosks, and bars must speak to the wanderer like a twig snapping under his feet in the forest.⁸⁴

Paris is more than a garden maze (*Irrgarten*); it is a warren of tunnels (*Irrstollen*). Italian cities are of course famous for allowing German tourists to stray. In the essay "Uncanny," Freud writes about losing his way in the red-light district of Rome. In his letter to Scholem about his visits to Rome and Florence, Benjamin bemoans that he did not have enough time to let himself stray:

Finally I have... not had so much time to concentrate on architecture. For my fully inductive manner of familiarizing myself with the topography of a place by searching out the banal, beautiful, or impoverished houses that make up the labyrinthian surroundings of major buildings takes up too much time and does not allow me to get to my reading; without such explorations all I have are impressions of the architecture.⁸⁵

The method he outlines to Scholem becomes a liability when traveling quickly. Furthermore, it requires the walker to give himself over to the labyrinth:

I have an excellent image of the topography of the place. You have to blindly tap your way out through a city so that you can walk back with sovereign confidence.⁸⁶

84. My translation; Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 20; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6: 469.

85. Benjamin, *Briefe*, 363–364.

86. *Ibid.*, 365.

As in his later descriptions of Paris as a tunnel system (*Paris Arcades II* and *Berlin Chronicle*), Benjamin suggests that the *Spaziergänger* must feel his way through the city, relying on touch rather than sight. If vision does assist, it is only for small signs seen close up, not for sighting long vistas along boulevards. Touch more than sight assists in these slow investigations.

Examining cities and buildings haptically is a minor theme in German architectural criticism. In his "Architecture" essay of 1795, Goethe remarks that architecture does not serve the eyes but can be perceived through the human body. He compares living in a well-designed building with the corporeal pleasure of ballroom dancing, wherein the body moves according to certain rules that constrict its freedom but nevertheless enhance its enjoyment:

One would think that architecture as a fine art works solely upon the eye, yet one has hardly noticed that it would be far better if architecture worked with a sense for the mechanical movement of the human body.

Man sollte denken, die Baukunst als schöne Kunst arbeite allein für's Auge; allein sie soll vorzüglich, und worauf man am wenigsten Acht hat, für den Sinn der mechanischen Bewegung des menschlichen Körpers arbeiten.⁸⁷

Goethe is at once more sensual and more organized by formal rules than Benjamin:

We perceive a pleasant sensation when, in dance, we move according to certain rules; we should be able to stir up a similar sensation in someone whom we guide, blindfolded, through a well-built house. In this case the weighty and complicated teachings of proportion apply, through which the character of a building and its various parts become possible.

Wir fühlen eine angenehme Empfindung, wenn wir uns im Tanze nach gewissen Gesetze bewegen; eine ähnliche Empfindung sollten wir bei jemand erregen können, den wir mit verbundenen Augen durch ein wohlgebautes Haus hindurch führen. Hier tritt die schwere und komplizierte Lehre von den Proportionen ein, wodurch der Charakter des Gebäudes und seiner verschiedenen Teile möglich wird.⁸⁸

Dance, as it appears in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, was a euphoric introduction to sexual contact, a movement so physically enjoyable that the dancers feel almost as if they have left their bodies. The analogy in architecture, Goethe suggests, would be to lead someone blindfolded through a building. Even without sight, the proportions would make themselves more manifest to the sense of touch. Goethe's understanding of haptic perception of architecture returns to the classical analogy

87. Goethe, "Baukunst," FA 1.18: 368.

88. *Ibid.*

between humans and buildings. Without stating so explicitly, he draws on the assumption that because humans are symmetrically organized, they will "grasp" a similar order in buildings through their own bodily contact with the limits that define space (the walls). Having taken hold of the geometrical arrangement of a house, they will infer an interior identity, its character, which in modernist terms is often reduced to its function—as monument, dwelling, or workplace.

The leap from Goethe's haptic sense of architecture to Benjamin's is neither historically nor theoretically direct. Goethe develops his idea during the sexual rush of living in Rome and under the influence of Johann Gottfried Herder's theory of sculpture. His scattered thoughts on haptic perception are systematized by art historians in the second half of the nineteenth century. Heinrich Wölfflin acknowledges the importance of Weimar aesthetics in his 1886 dissertation, *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture*.⁸⁹ That Benjamin despised Wölfflin after attending his lectures in 1915 does not preclude his pursuing a line of aesthetics the art historian had first developed thirty years prior.⁹⁰ Still, strong differences appear between Goethe's and Benjamin's accounts of haptic perception. The poet's architectural test is perhaps too sensual to find a direct analogy in Benjamin's streetwalking. Goethe celebrates his sightless discovery of proportions in his fifth *Roman Elegy*, where he contrasts the tourist, who leafs through famous art during the day, to the evening lover, who traces the sculptural form of his mistress's breasts and hips. Goethe ties haptic sensing to his immediate bodily environment, with architecture as the widest spatial range; Benjamin extends the sensing, so that it loses its bodily immediacy to function as a metaphor for the pedestrian's encounter with a city. The arcade has the literal quality of its German name: a passageway, wherein traffic moves. Benjamin does play on the sexual/bodily connotations of the tunnel system lightly when, for example, he refers to the Passage as the mother of Surrealism, yet his materialist manner of thinking leads the topographical and architectural metaphors away from individualist significations and toward class identities.

Benjamin travels through Italy in quite the reverse manner from Goethe. Not only does he enter from the south, but he also buys and reads quantities of books: "I have had to limit myself to buying French books in Naples, Rome, and Florence, mostly new releases."⁹¹ If Goethe seeks Italy in order to flee books and paperwork, Benjamin treats the place as an extension of his reading. Goethe remains in Italy for over a year, whereas the impoverished Benjamin hastens back to Berlin.

89. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture*, in *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, intro. and trans. Harry Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 153, 161. This collection presents the most important theorists of empathy for architecture in the nineteenth-century German context.

90. Thomas Levin, "Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History," *October* 47 (1988): 79.

91. "Ich habe mich darauf beschränken müssen, in Neapel, Rom und Florenz französische Bücher einzukaufen; meist Neuerscheinungen." Benjamin, *Briefe*, 365.

Meandering through Rome and Florence takes too much time. In the first paragraph of his *Soviet Encyclopedia* essay on Goethe, Benjamin discusses the poet's disregard for urban life, even though he had been born in Frankfurt. The only cities Goethe really ever came to know, Benjamin writes, were Rome and Naples.⁹² Like Benjamin, Goethe also wrote short essays about Neapolitan street life after his return from Italy.⁹³ Goethe takes a physiognomic approach to the city. Benjamin and Goethe share the trait that they both write against the reigning guidebooks of their era. Just as Benjamin enjoys contradicting Baedeker, Goethe reacts against the claim made in Volkmann's *Reisebeschreibung* that Naples had up to forty thousand people who spent the day doing nothing, and sets out to describe the many types of laborers he encounters in the streets. Baggage carriers, boatmen, fishermen, coachmen, small children selling food—everywhere Goethe finds activity. He chides the northerner who would not recognize the ease and pleasure with which Neapolitans work. While he concludes it would take years living there to produce a complete tableau of the city, Goethe clearly considers such a sociological study fascinating. Like Benjamin, he tries to account for how the lower classes carry on despite their total impoverishment.

Benjamin's later theoretical account of tactile perception takes inspiration from Naples.⁹⁴ Its streets and buildings offer no firm boundaries, no severe walls, that demand that the pedestrian keep his distance. The city is described as porous, the very antithesis of classical articulation: "The stamp of the definitive is avoided." (Man meidet das definitive, Gepräge.)⁹⁵ The division between street and structure, which is meant in northern cities to reinforce the distinction between family privacy and public spectacle, does not exist in Naples. Personal relationships shift constantly in an environment where architecture does not enforce distinctions. This condition has persisted so long in Naples that over time it is even difficult to distinguish buildings that have fallen apart from those that are being built. Construction and ruin, the two extremes of architecture, blur together. Projects are finished because the social relationships are constantly shifting, and construction is kept open-ended so that buildings can adapt to new personal, familial, and communal arrangements. Architecture is required to improvise; thus it has a temporary and incomplete quality. Benjamin and Lacis provide a fantastical, whirling image of Neapolitan life, one that perhaps fits other travel accounts of the city, but even if their essay belongs to the longer tradition of Germans celebrating south-

92. Benjamin, "Goethe," in *Selected Writings*, 2: 161.

93. Goethe, "Auszüge aus einem Reise-Journal," FA 1.18: 213–220, 221–225.

94. Graeme Gilloch identifies a similar emphasis on proximity and tactility in Benjamin's essay "Moscow." Graeme Gilloch, "Benjamin's Moscow, Baudrillard's America," in *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 2002), 164–170 in particular.

95. Benjamin, "Naples," in *Selected Writings*, 1: 416; Benjamin, "Neapel," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.1: 309.

ern Italy, there is no question that the essay's description of buildings and public spaces is decisively unclassical. Nowhere in the essays does one find an architectural description wherein the clearly defined elements of buildings are perceived as a whole by an observer standing at a perspectival distance. The separation of building and viewer, parts and whole, which underlies classical architecture, is lost to the impoverished Neapolitans, as it is hidden from modern industrial workers. The position of the average Neapolitan pedestrian corresponds closely to the modern city dwellers' tactile relation to buildings, in Benjamin's account, creating the kind of correspondence between the archaic and the modern that Benjamin relished. The archaic open spaces recounted in "Naples" inform Benjamin's first writings on the collective identity embodied by the Paris arcades: "Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally wakeful, eternally agitated being that—in the space between the building fronts—lives, experiences, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls." (Straßen sind die Wohnung des kollektivs. Das Kollektivum ist ein ewig waches, ewig bewegtes Wesen, das zwischen Häuserwänden soviel erlebt, erfährt, erkennt und ersinnt wie Individuen im Schutze ihrer vier Wände.)⁹⁶ Benjamin's fascination with the archaic manner of building in Naples corresponds to Giedion's account of the anonymous nineteenth-century engineer who designed and built according to immediate needs: "The names of the constructors who gave shape to the nineteenth century are for the most part unknown. Just as in the Middle Ages, the actual development occurred anonymously."⁹⁷

Only the advent of film and photography reestablishes a visual relationship between the urban populace and their environment. The camera creates a perceptual distance even as it moves in for close-ups and slow-motion shots. Film accomplishes some of the effects of Benjamin and Lacis's writing; they both isolate features that would otherwise go unnoticed. In the case of the World Trade Center attack, film provides a repetitive return to the shock of destruction—repetition carried to the extreme, so that it almost becomes a photo still, thereby freezing the attack into an eternal moment ripe for contemplation.

The pilgrimages to Ground Zero demonstrate that traumatic destruction lends an auratic quality to spaces previously considered unimportant. The World Trade Center was indeed perceived by most commuters as a place one rubbed up against, a colossus that evoked no particular aesthetic values. Only tourists would look up at it or ride the elevator up to look out from it. The Towers, like the Italian villa, provided godlike views that stunned the first-time visitor but were ignored by the thousands who worked in and around the buildings. Only after the fact did postcards, placards, and video reruns transform the Towers into a site of elegiac reflection. Photography today reinforces the spectatorial reconstruction of lost architecture,

96. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 879; Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5.2: 1051.

97. Giedion, *Building in France*, 97.

and not just for tourists. The most engaged critics of architectural aesthetics have turned out to be the very same workers whom Benjamin so accurately described. The visual contemplation of ruins and plans for reconstruction has become the basis for intense introspection (and proud chest-beating) by the inhabitants of both locales. In New York, even the gruffest native has become an intense participant in the mythology of his own city.