The Chain of Things
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Published by Cornell University Press

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The Chain of Things: Divinatory Magic and the Practice of Reading in German Literature and Thought, 1850–1940.

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This chapter will focus on Walter Benjamin and his modernist engagement with magic reading. But I want to begin elsewhere, with Hermann Hesse and a famous scene in *The Steppenwolf* (1927) that seems equally symptomatic of many of modernism’s dominant preoccupations with magic and divination. Hesse’s protagonist, Harry Haller, in a somewhat distracted state of mind, is out for an evening walk when a man appears from out of an alley carrying a signboard and a box full of pamphlets. Haller reads the sign’s “dancing reeling letters,” fleeting, fitful, and almost illegible, announcing, “Magic Theater: Entrance Not for Everyone.” He accosts the man, who mechanically hands him one of his booklets and then disappears through a doorway. The pamphlet seems to be—or rather, is—one of those poorly printed booklets that are sold at fairs ("Were you born in January?"), a “companion volume to fortune-telling books.” But once Haller starts to read it, he sees it is entitled “Treatise on the Steppenwolf,” and finds a detailed,
deeply insightful reading of himself, his inner world, and his im-
pending future, imparted to him from out of a seemingly timeless,
metatextual realm presided over by the “immortal” Goethe, and
promising release from the oppressive strictures of both his person
and historical moment.

As the critic Theodore Ziolkowski points out, the magical expe-
rience that inserts itself into the otherwise realist setting here and
elsewhere in this novel—indeed in much of Hesse’s fiction—reflects
a theory of magic reading that Hesse articulates in a 1920 essay,
“On Reading Books” (Vom Bücherlesen).\(^2\) In this essay, Hesse dis-
tinguishes between three types of reader, though he also stresses
that each of us belongs intermittently (\(\text{zeitweise}\)) to now this, now
that type: the different modes of reading are never entirely exclu-
sive. The first is that of the naïve reader: “The book leads, the
reader follows. The subject matter is taken as objective, is accepted
as reality.” The second type is more childlike, but also (and so) less
naïve: even as a child “begins to play with things, bread becomes a
mountain in which one bores a tunnel, and bed a cave, a garden, a
snowfield,” so this reader “regards neither the subject matter nor
the form of a book as its only and most important quality. . . . He
knows that every thing can have in it ten or a hundred meanings.”
This detachment from the intentional, objective meaning of the au-
thor and text is not only in the direction of enabling the reader’s
free play, but also in that of recognizing the restrictions on that
of the author and his text: recognizing the external binding forces
that invisibly determine the text world’s and author’s seemingly
independent choices.

The third type of reader—and the one identified as the most
intermittent, the most occasional—is, as it were, “a total child.”
He gives himself over completely to associative thinking: “He uses
a book no differently than any object in the world. It is basically
all the same to him, what he reads. . . . He doesn’t read a writer
in order to have that writer interpret the world for him. He inter-
prets himself (\(\text{Er deutet selber}\)).” And, Hesse insists, we are all at
times this reader: “At that moment, when our fantasy and associ-
ative ability are at their height, we no longer really read what is
written on the paper before us at all any more. Rather, we swim in
a stream of incitements and incidental ideas that come to us from what is read. These can come from the text; they can even come from the type-face.” He suggests that even a newspaper insert can become a site of revelation for this reader—much, we suppose, as that fortune-telling pamphlet became for Haller.

Hesse does admit that this reader is no longer reading the text, and not least because he seems to be producing his entire experience—indeed, his entire world—out of his self alone (although the boundaries of that self seem as violently dissolved as those of the text). But he qualifies this concession in two ways. First, he explains that even if such a reader is, strictly speaking, no longer “reading” the book before him, he is engaged in a mode of “reading” that has become transferable to the world as a whole, to encounters not only with Shakespeare, Goethe, or Stendahl, but with carpets, stone walls, or cigarette packs. The whole world of things becomes again, as it was in ancient times, a riddling text to be magically read. And second, he insists again that this mode of reading is at best momentary and supplemental to other, more objective engagements—even if he also insists that no reading is complete without the complementary inclusion of this magical dimension.

Hesse’s essay thus comes rather unreservedly to celebrate this mode of magic reading, ultimately extending it to embrace the world at large and infusing it as an essential feature of even everyday experience. His novel, however, poses an additional, more troubling perspective, one unbroached by the essay but nonetheless anticipated in its second mode of reading, the one that recognizes a broader, binding context that accompanies and encompasses this seemingly free play of the reading subject. That is, in the novel, Haller is led to divine the many affinities and sympathies between the magical thinking embraced by him in its psychological and aesthetic modalities and vehemently rejected by him in the popular culture and mass political movements of his day. And that uneasy, disturbing link between the psychological, aesthetical subject and his social, political Umwelt looms as an ineradicable factor affecting any and every consideration of this newly modern, magical order of experience.

Although unusually formulaic in his presentations, Hesse was by no means alone in his preoccupation with magic and magical
thinking during the modernist period. Indeed, the overt irruption of the magical, in ancient as well as new forms and in both art and the world, is one of the key features often thought to distinguish modernism from realism, and even the most major figures of high modernism made it one of their central concerns. Among the most important of these was Sigmund Freud, whose influence on Hesse’s reading model is explicitly stated in the essay, and whose concepts of wish fulfillment, dream signs, and a hidden other realm of forces beyond the conscious or intentional represent some of the most dominant forms that the ancient tradition of magic, symbols, and their divination take in the modernist world, and so, too, some of the most powerful factors displacing the realist models of the preceding century. Freud himself, spurred by his studies not only of childhood and dreams but also of classical, romantic, and realist literature, eventually connected his psychoanalytic interpretations of the world back with the more ancient magical traditions being rediscovered by E. B. Tylor and James Frazer at the end of the nineteenth century, even as, in a more contemporary context, he was moved to consider the modern occult phenomenon of telepathy and the archaic forces animating the mass politics of his moment. Although unlike Hesse (or for that matter Jung, ultimately the more profound influence on Hesse) Freud tended to understand psychology—including its mode of reading (deuten)—as a counterforce to magical thinking and not just its resurrection, he too was profoundly aware of the ambivalence toward the new world order his work had helped create. Certainly no study of magic reading and modernism, including this one, can overlook Freud, even if it chooses not to focus on him.

For again, he was by no means alone, nor was psychology the only sphere in which this new old world was emerging. So, for example, in *The Wasteland* (1922), T. S. Eliot also melded together the modernist world with Frazer’s magical one, apparently quite independently of Freud, reflecting instead tendencies in vitalist philosophy and Christian theology. And part of this melding included the divinatory readings that formed part of both its archaic and the popular spheres, readings both derided at the surface and deeply engaged by the allusive associational and symboled aesthetics of the poem itself. And such readings return in much more troubled
tones during the much more troubled times of *Four Quartets* (1941), where Eliot also links them to psychoanalysis itself—not as the counter to magical thinking, but as one of its symptomatically modern forms:

To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits, [. . .]
Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,
Observe disease in signatures, evoke
Biography from the wrinkles of the palm
And tragedy from the fingers; release omens
By sortilege, or tea leaves, riddle the inevitable
With playing cards, fiddle with pentagrams
Or barbituric acids, or dissect
The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors—
To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams; all these are usual
Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press:
And always will be, some of them especially
When there is distress of nations and perplexity
Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgeware Road.
Men’s curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension.⁶

These closing lines occur in the context of the poem’s own deep meditations on the convoluted intricacies of time (“Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past”), a concern that comes more and more to dominate modernism and that, we’ve seen, has always been behind divinatory reading.⁷ Moreover, the pressing desire for release from the strictures of present historical time that Eliot suggests drives such magic thinking is also, of course, behind his own reflections: it is just that, in what might prove a signature modernist move, he seems to shut off the future as the place where such redemption might be found—looking instead to a “point of intersection of the timeless / With time,” much as Hesse does in *The Steppenwolf* with the realm of the “Immortals” from which the “Treatise” apparently emanates.

And then, of course, there is Thomas Mann. *The Magic Mountain* appears in 1924, with its own radical rethinking of temporality
in both thematic and formal terms. *Mario and the Magician* of 1929 explicitly explores the links between magic and the rising movement of fascism, while also implicating Mann’s own art in the equation. Certainly we know that Mann had a keen interest in the occult movements of the Weimar period as well as a penchant throughout his life for signing his correspondence as “The Magician” (Der Zauberer) (even as Hesse signed as “Klingsor”). And he wrote his late, great novel, *Dr. Faustus* (1947), in such a manner as to equate early modern magic and modernist aesthetics, and both with fascist politics—and he did so by employing a *Technik* of his own that relied almost exclusively on the effects of analogy, sympathy, contiguity, and likeness among objects, events, times, and beings to establish its serial chains of significance, in ways that by default and design required magic reading (albeit of a far different kind than we find in Hesse). This novel, too, struggles not only with the attractions and repulsions of magical modes, but also with its stubborn desires for redemption in the face of its equally stubborn refusal of the future as the site of their possible fulfillment.

Obviously, this list could be almost endlessly extended (Proust’s magic lantern and correspondences! The surrealists’ found objects! Even Hesse’s own *Glass Bead Game*)—which is part of the point. But among all those who focused on the connections between the ancient and early modern traditions of magic and the new modernist milieu, on the convolutions of time and the inescapable weight of the present historical moment that made the equation of release and the future so problematic, and on links between the psychological and aesthetic subjects and the mass political and cultural context—among all those, perhaps no one was so concerned to understand the continuance of ancient practices in modern magic reading as Walter Benjamin—far more so than even Hesse, whose explicit interests in this topic were still restricted to contemporary models. And there are two additional reasons why Benjamin proves singularly exemplary for our purposes. Both have to do with the fact that he is profoundly concerned with the connections of modernism not only to the ancient world (what he called primal history or *Urgeschichte*) but also to the world of the century just past, the nineteenth century, which has been our focus so far. For this
reason, we find him engaging with two of those strains of magic we noted as lingering out of the nineteenth century and finding new life in the early twentieth: the overt concerns with language and with a vital natural world—a thing world—beyond language, with a sympathetic world order reconceived to support the divinatory reading of the modernist period.\(^9\)

**Divining Benjamin**

That Walter Benjamin was preoccupied with issues of magic and divination is clear. These figure prominently in his works, from the first paragraph of one of his earliest publications, “Fate and Character” (Schicksal und Charakter, 1919), to the last section of one of his last pieces, “On the Concept of History” (Über den Begriff der Geschichte, 1940). But the exact nature of that preoccupation is not as clear, even if it does seem remarkably consistent; indeed, as is characteristic of Benjamin’s thought in so many other respects as well, the complexity of his position is not so much a matter of change or development as it is of an intricate mode of negation and affirmation that was there from the start.\(^{10}\) On the one hand, there is an undeniable suspicion, even rejection, of divination and “predicting the future” that runs throughout his work. We see it already in “Fate and Character,” but it is even more evident in pieces such as “Light from Obscurantists” (Erleuchtung durch Dünkelmänner), his review of Hans Liebenstoeckl’s *The Occult Sciences in the Light of Our Age* (Die Geheimwissenschaften im Lichte unserer Zeit, 1932), or his essay “Experience and Poverty” (Erfahrung und Armut, 1933). Here, Benjamin unequivocally attacks what he calls the “stupidity, low cunning, and coarseness” of the contemporary modes of magical divination, “the last pitiful by-product of more significant traditions,” and he seems explicitly to include in his critique of magic and fortune- or future-telling the misguided “hunger of broad sections of the people for happiness (Glückshunger).”\(^{11}\)

The resistance to magical thinking is obviously of a piece with his principled distaste for the tenets of Lebensphilosophie; for the phantasmagoria of commodity culture; the emergence of fascism
with its “magic of blood and glitter”; and eventually, too, for that form of Marxism that divined future happiness in the fated progress of social history. In all this, Benjamin could be said to share (along with Freud, Eliot, and Mann) in the skeptical, disenchanted enlightenment stance that gained such increased urgency amid the resurgent “barbarism” of the early to mid-twentieth century. And added to this secular tradition, there was also a religious ground supporting Benjamin’s suspicions of divination as well. As he reminds us at the end of “On the Concept of History,” “Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future,” and while this ban on future knowing is perhaps most fully explored in the context of his famous essay on Kafka, it seems safe to say that “No Future” is an injunction implicitly guiding much of his thought.

On the other hand, many of the most traditional and defining features of magic reading repeatedly reappear as central elements of Benjamin’s thought, and are often explicitly identified with the practices of divination, and with reading as divination—and often enough in the very same essays that critique it. As I hope to show, alongside Benjamin’s emphatic rejection of occult magic and its divinatory impulses there is an equally emphatic investment in precisely the magical traditions and divinatory practices we have traced from antiquity through the early modern period into romanticism and from there into realism. For this reason it seems more accurate to claim not that Benjamin is committed to the disenchantment of magic reading in his work, but that he is intent on clearing space for reapproaching and reasserting its truths. Not, then, to refute magic reading and assign it to some long-lost past but, in however “weak” a form, to redeem it and its future promise. And as we will see, to do so involves reimagining not only divination, but also the temporal, natural, and representational orders on which it has long depended.

Fate

As mentioned, Benjamin’s preoccupation with divination is evident already in “Fate and Character,” and some of the features
that will shape his thinking on the topic throughout his writings are first formulated in this early essay, which strives to develop a concept of fate (Schicksal) that embraces both ancient Greek beliefs and modern fortune-telling of the most vulgar, popular kind (especially card- and palm-reading).\textsuperscript{15} Crucially, Benjamin begins by posing the problem of fate as a matter of reading, and in particular as a matter of reading to predict the future (die Zukunft herauszusagen); and although he emphasizes right from the outset that such a reading practice is all but inconceivable for his contemporaries—and even that, in principle, he shares in the common critique and remains even more cautious than most about the idea of the future—he also sets out to show how the idea of such a reading is not nonsensical and how access to future fate need not exceed human powers of perception.\textsuperscript{16} He bases his argument on a consideration of the relation between fate and signs—again, very much in keeping with approaching the problem in terms of reading. Fate, he says, like character, can only be apprehended through signs, not in itself, and such signs have a particular nature with particular features. First, the what they signify is always hidden, invisible, situated outside the immediately visible—in a realm, he says, that is not “present” (gegenwärtig) even if “there” (zur Stelle).\textsuperscript{17} Second, what makes these signs signs, what determines their sign quality, is that they signify a relationship or connection (Zusammenhang) between this other realm (this fate) and the given subject: it is this connection that the signs signify. Benjamin insists that the relation or connection between the sign and signified cannot, strictly speaking, be considered a causal one, at least not in any simple sense of causality, and this is what makes determining the nature of these signs and of this connection so difficult—and has him decline in this early essay fully to explore what such a sign system might be like.\textsuperscript{18} But he does provide an analysis of two key features: things and time.

First, he notes that all apparent phenomena (Erscheinungen) of external life, in addition to that primary site of the human body, can become signs of fate, of this hidden world and connection. This is in keeping with his insistence that between the active man and the external world all is interaction, their spheres interpenetrate,
such that the idea of a discrete individual “character” as the defining core of man—or of man’s relationship to the world—must give way to a far more porous boundary between the given subject and external world, to a connection in fact that surreptitiously binds him to all of life, natural life, or rather, binds him to the unseen world that determines both him and the external world and produces signs. Benjamin defines this interpenetrating connection as based on guilt or debt, as a *Schuldzusammenhang*, although he also hedges on the implicit religious context and more straightforwardly calls it a natural life in man (*ein natürliches Leben im Menschen*). It is this well-nigh ontological connection to everything—to what he also calls bare life (*das bloße Leben*)—that allows the clairvoyant to connect the subject’s fate to cards, hand-lines or planets, sign-things that, simply by making the connection, make it visible—connect it.

Second, Benjamin notes that the signs that make this connection—noncausal but binding, and unseen even if bound to everything visible—exist in a peculiar temporal modality. It is, he says, a very different kind of time, and “the complete elucidation of these matters depends on determining the particular nature of time in fate.” Adumbrating some of his later claims about messianic time (and recalling as well both Hesse and Eliot), he declares, “The fortune-teller who uses cards and the seer who reads palms teach us at least that this time can at every moment be made simultaneous with another (not present).” It is not, he adds, an autonomous time, any more than its signs are autonomous, but parasitically dependent on another time (human, historical, sequential); it is a time that has no present and knows past and future only as particular (*eigentümlich*) variations. And it is precisely the peculiar temporal dimension to the hidden world of fate and its intersection with a given moment in the inquiring subject’s time world that informs and determines its signs, a temporality that both cuts against simple, causally conceived notions of a “future” and nonetheless keeps divinatory practices eminently viable.

There is one additional issue raised in this early essay that is identified as essential but also left open: the question of happiness, fortune, or *Glück*. Benjamin poses the issue as a series of questions,
asking: Has fate any relation (Beziehung) to Glück? Is Glück a constitutive category of fate? His immediate response, much as with the question of predicting the future, seems to be no. But as in the case of predicting the future, the negative response might well be more about the limits of the present framework for posing the question—here the religious framework that interprets natural life as Schuldzusammenhang—than about the answer itself. In any case, the link between the two questions—of Glück and of the future—is hardly a chance one for Benjamin, nor is the matter of his apparent ambivalence about both. These two issues, both singly and joined, will reappear repeatedly in Benjamin’s thinking as points of contention, and remain central to his thoughts about reading.

Graphology

After this early essay, there are three more or less separate spheres in which the still early Benjamin pursues and elaborates his investigations into magic reading, each of which provides essential background for his most comprehensive reflections on the topic in the late essays “The Doctrine of the Similar” (Lehre vom Ähnlichen) and “The Mimetic Faculty” (Über das mimetische Vermögen), to which we will eventually turn. These three precursor spheres are graphology, gambling, and childhood, and Benjamin approaches each as a modern avatar of more ancient traditions of magic and divination, and each as a site for a peculiar mode of magic reading and experience.

As a specialized mode of reading language, graphology is usually considered an invention of the nineteenth century, beginning in France with the work of Michon and Crépieux-Jamin and then migrating to Germany, where the Lebensphilosoph Ludwig Klages had a major impact on its development. It was meant to be practiced by trained professionals, though well-read and gifted amateurs such as Benjamin himself could venture readings as well: the practitioner was to be guided by fixed points of reference in the script (direction, size, spacing, pressure, speed, etc.) with set
meanings, but also by an intuitive sensitivity to the overall context and specific occasion of the writing.\textsuperscript{30} For all the emphasis on its modernity and scientific basis, graphology thus still betrays its affinities with earlier traditions of magic reading such as entrail reading, not least through its purported scientificity and openness to the occasion; and for all Benjamin’s emphasis on distinguishing its “genuine” tenets from its popular and vulgar or dogmatically vitalistic strains, the mode of graphology in which he was most invested was equally distinct from rational empirical approaches (influenced by Wilhelm Wundt et al.), and still devoted to addressing “the integral riddle of mankind.”\textsuperscript{31}

In reading, graphology attends to a form of meaning to written words that is ancillary to their semantic content; it seeks to read another, differently present realm of significance by decomposing words into the materiality and activity of their letters, even parts of letters; these are then construed as what Benjamin calls a set of hieroglyphs that, like allegories, function according to a differently ordered logic from that ruling their immediate, ordinary content and meaning.\textsuperscript{32} That is, words are approached as signs of a different or additional kind from ordinary linguistic signs; this difference pertains at the level of both signifier and signified—and at the level of the connection between them, which is also established in different ways from ordinary language.

With respect to the signifier, graphology approaches words and letters as things, sign-things that convey something otherwise hidden, a meaning more or less unaffected by conscious intellection or intent—and therein lies both their status and their privilege as signs. Benjamin calls these sign-things images, and insists they are part of the visible world (although also, we’ll see, with extensions into the invisible).\textsuperscript{33} But he also describes them as natural, well-nigh animate things. He does so in part because he rejects the sign theory or \textit{Zeichenlehre} of the French school that maintained a straightforward connection between image-sign and signified (e.g., cramped letters, cramped character), but that also and above all held to a monosemantic and \textit{static} sense of signs. In this respect at least, Klages is privileged for his emphasis on the essential importance of \textit{movement} for the sign-nature of script: it is only in the context of
movement, the bodily material force of handwriting—which not
incidentally introduces temporality into the line of writing, making
it an essentially temporal space or realm—that the signs of script’s
“other” language, the one beyond intention, become manifest and
fix their otherwise open, polysemic meaning in an associational
chain.\(^{34}\) (Robert Saudek will emphasize the special importance of
speed to this movement, a factor that will become important to us
later on.)

Movement only partly explains why the image-signs of language
are described as animate things. It is also partly something more
than this, something intimately connected to the materiality of
these image-signs—and not only as the result of the bodily mate-
rial movement on the (human) writer’s part, but as bodily entities
in their own right. Language, Benjamin says, has a body, and gra-
phology is concerned with this bodily aspect of language, and he il-
ustrates what he means by this with a “most revealing and appro-
priate” comparison between children’s drawings and handwriting,
wherein letters behave “just as their models—people, animals, and
objects”—with tails and legs, heads, eyes, and mouths, and wherein
reading them graphologically is a matter of transforming letters
back into their bodily representations (\( \text{in körperliche Darstellun-
gen zurückverwandeln} [n] \)).\(^{35}\) To some extent, this is about projecting
the human condition onto externalized objects and animating them
with a life or formative force that is not their own, and so reading
them graphologically as a matter of transforming them back into
human representations (more anon).\(^{36}\) But to an equal and equally
important extent, this is also about the direct, inherent connection
of material words, qua things, with the material world, the thing
world (\( \text{die Dingwelt} \)) and hence natural world, and reading them
as transforming them back into the representations that body forth
that world, that life, and writing’s connection to it. Both of these
readings—and the reference to children (as avatars of earlier times)
suggests it—are of course very much in keeping with the ancient
divinatory practice of reading animals themselves as animate signs,
and of treating words in texts in the same way as animal-signs,
even as themselves animate, natural signs (as what the ancients
called “characters”); and it helps give added force to Benjamin’s
stress on reading the swoops of hand strokes—“right and left, top and bottom, straight and sloping”—like so many bird movements read by an augur.  

In any case, in graphology as in ancient divination, the signs to be read are visual, moving objects—in this case words and letters—that operate apart from rational interference and from their normal significance and context; that function as animate signs—even as animals—implicitly grounded in a natural, bodily world; and precisely because they bypass the realm of human intent and participate instead in a subhuman, creaturely, non-(self-)conscious realm, they are privileged signifiers for knowledge about the human.

With respect to the signified, and in keeping with their designation as hieroglyphs, Benjamin again insists that words and letters do not behave as ordinary signs and do not convey ordinary, exclusively “human,” much less conscious, meaning. In this context, he objects both to the French school, “whose proponents linked qualities of character to quite specific written signs,” and to Klages, who “interprets handwriting basically as . . . expressive movement (Ausdrucksbewegung).” In each case, his objection seems to be that they refer far too directly and exclusively to a characterological realm of meaning, which is to say, to a discretely human, individual, and ego-centered realm or core. This mistaken reading of handwriting as signs of character is the same error foregrounded (and sidelined) by Benjamin with respect to the signs of fate in “Fate and Character,” in which he also faulted modern physiognomy—the practice of directly reading the body as sign—for the same misguided focus. In each case, Benjamin is intent on rejecting a strictly individual and merely human contextualization and one that appeals primarily to known, present features of that individual.

Against the sign theories and readings of the French and Klages, Benjamin poses those of Anja and Georg Mendelssohn, who first institutionalized graphology in German universities. Their readings, he says, create a space for an ideographic interpretation of handwriting, “a graphology that interprets script in terms of the unconscious graphic elements, the unconscious image fantasies, that it contains.” As he will put it later with specific reference to
“this magic aspect of language” (*diese magische Seite der Sprache*), their graphology teaches us “to recognize, in handwriting, images—or more precisely, picture puzzles (*Vexierbilder*)—that the unconscious of the writer conceals in his writing.” As the references to images as fantasies, to *Vexierbilder*, and to the unconscious all make clear, and as Benjamin explicitly declares, the Mendelssohns’ sign theory and the “concealed” realm their images signify point to Freud’s concepts of wish fulfillment, dream signs, and a hidden other realm of forces beyond the conscious or intentional. But for all the affinities to be explored between Freud and Benjamin with respect to magic reading, and for all the affirmation of Freud implicit in Benjamin’s positive review of the Mendelssohns’ work, Benjamin’s position is still somewhat different from Freud’s and the Mendelssohns’, and in ways that, I believe, reveal his even stronger ties to the more ancient traditions of *sympatheia*.

The differences between Benjamin and the Freudians can be glimpsed most clearly in Benjamin’s designating the “other” realm signified by the “other” dimension of handwriting not as the unconscious but as the body. That is, Benjamin says not only that language has a body—even, we saw, an animality—but that the body has a language, and graphology explores both the bodily aspect of the language of handwriting and the “speaking” aspect of the body in handwriting (*was an der Sprache der Handschrift das Leibhafte, am Leibe der Handschrift das Sprechende ist*). For Benjamin it is the body of the given subject that is projected on, speaks through, and is connected to the body representations of script, a natural, indeed physical and material connection that underwrites the “magical” correspondences between the two. As in “Fate and Character,” the connections that although unseen bind the embodied subject to, and are made visible by, these sign-things are evidence of their common ground in a not-specifically human natural world—hence the shared basis of the twin sources for the natural, creaturely life of script, in the human subject and the material letters alike. It is just this hidden connection and correspondence, this common and shared ground, that on the one hand determines that the relation between the signifier and signified in the given word is not the arbitrary one of ordinary language and its
ordinary semantic and cognitive modes, and is instead a well-nigh ontological relation—and herein crucially different from Freudian dream language—with its human projections always also natural connections; and on the other hand determines that the truth or fate signaled in and through script is not revealing of a discrete individual character but of a necessarily open relation, or participation, of each subject with the external physical world, including the natural materiality of words.

This, too, is part of Benjamin’s distance both from the French school and Klages and from Freud, who not only overlooks the creaturely body in favor of the human unconscious but whose primary analyses also focus on individual character, even if unconscious. But Benjamin’s position here remains much closer to that in “Fate and Character,” when he claims that individual characters do not have a fate, or rather that the signs of fate do not pertain to individual character but only to a natural life in him—the same position he adopts regarding the signs of physiognomy, and a position also, of course, much closer to that of the ancient traditions, perhaps especially to that of the Neoplatonists.44 This is emphatically manifest in Benjamin’s closing thoughts in his main essay on graphology, which push the points of deindividualization and depersonalization and, instead, worldly connection, and do so in a language deliberately evocative of the magic, allegorical reading modes of the early modern world—which was already implicit in Benjamin’s referring to words and letters in the first place not as dream images or even picture puzzles but as hieroglyphs, a word whose association for Benjamin with the allegorical traditions of the baroque can be traced back to his Trauerspiel book. In his final sentences, Benjamin challenges modern graphologists to consider not comparing different individual examples to prove discrete individualized identities, but to refer instead simply to a single sample of handwriting (eine einzige Handschrift), and declares, “Anyone able to share in this way of seeing would be able to take any scrap of paper covered with writing and discover in it a free ticket to the great theatrum mundi (das große Welttheater). It would reveal to him the pantomime of the entire nature and existence of mankind, in microcosmic form.”45
Clearly, in positing this almost mystical connection or participation, this magical correspondence between the body-nature of man and of words—and by extension between man, language, and the great external world—Benjamin is approaching not only the sympathetic logic of earlier times, but also the *Lebensphilosophien* and occult sciences of his own, precisely those positions he claims to find intolerable. And this seeming ambivalence is even more evident in those moments where his explication of graphology comes closest to those concerns most associated with magic reading: prediction and clairvoyance or telepathy. On the one hand, Benjamin seems rather forcefully to deny any straightforward predictive power to graphology, especially when it comes to divining any future individual action or fate—indeed, he seems to suggest an ethical imperative against such reading. But it is worth noting two points. First, that his reason for this restriction echoes the language he used in “Fate and Character” to describe the peculiar temporality of fate that likewise complicated its divinatory dimension: all possible actions and outcomes, he says, are essentially preexistent potentialities that remain hidden and unrealized and emerge into conscious realization only at the moment of chance intersection with a concrete specific occasion. And second, although Benjamin doesn’t foreground this point, the future does play a crucial role in the graphologist’s reading of the signs, the moving line of writing itself, serving as a directional space toward which all script tends, and keeping open and then finally fixing the meaning, the sign-quality, of the hand strokes themselves—which without that implicit futurity and until that future moment remain hidden, unrealized, unknown. Graphology might not be required to read signs of the future, but it does require a future to read the signs at hand.

On the other hand, for all his reluctance regarding prediction, Benjamin seems quite willing to grant both clairvoyance and telepathy a place in graphological reading. He describes what he calls a “cubic” graphology, which sees beyond the only apparently two-dimensional surface of writing into an invisible realm both behind and before the visible material plane, a realm into which the visual script-signs extend in “immaterial curves,” and he asks, “Could the cubic pictorial space of script be a copy in microcosm of a
clairvoyant space (ein mikrokosmisches Abbild des Erscheinungsraumes der Hellsicht)?” And he predicts “that one day it may be possible to exploit graphology to investigate telepathic events.”50 (We could speculate that this three-dimensionality brings out or accentuates the body-nature of script, but this would require ourselves to enter an immaterial and clairvoyant space.) What we see, then, in Benjamin’s description of graphology that connects it back to earlier traditions of magic reading is this: it approaches words as conveying an ancillary mode of signification attendant on their ordinary, intended, and differently present meaning, where signs speak of a cognitive mode distinct from rational consciousness and point instead to another hidden world both inside and around us; that this world that animates signs—and so makes them signs—is in essential ways a natural, even animal one that connects man to language in ways that bypass the most exclusively human dimension of the world, recognizing or realizing both as linked in invisible but fully natural ways; and that, precisely in this nonhuman and invisible form, the magic reading of script makes visible in microcosmic form the very nature of “the integral riddle of mankind” and its relation to the great external world or Welttheater. And we note how different this is from the case in Keller, where signs come between man and the natural world and are not a part of it, or from Fontane, where language remains exclusively a human social affair, connecting men only to each other and not to nature, or even from Hesse, for whom the scrap of paper might well open up a great and magic theater, but one more or less only of the internal unconscious, not of the nonhuman external world.

**Gambling**

The two major elements of ancient magic reading that were also adumbrated in “Fate and Character” but play only an implicit role in the discussion of graphology are front and center in Benjamin’s musings on gambling, namely, the elements of time, including the matters of both occasionality and futurity, and of Glück, including the matters of both chance and fortune, happenstance and
happiness. As we noted in the previous chapter, on Fontane, E. B. Tylor specifically singled out sports and games of chance as one of the last remaining refuges for magic thinking in the modern world, supplementing Foucault’s singular focus on literature. And as with Fontane, Benjamin’s interest in such gaming is primarily (if not exclusively) concentrated on its magic thinking, which he explicitly identifies as a mode of reading and a form of divination—although in radical contrast with Fontane, such games and their reading are decidedly anti-social, focused on the isolated individual and his relation not to other humans but, we’ll see, again to a nonhuman realm. In any case, the interest in gaming links some of Benjamin’s earliest work in a chain extending all the way to the *Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*), and proves a somewhat surprising nodal point connecting some of his most crucial ideas about reading—and not only about reading.

Although in the *Arcades Project* Benjamin describes playing cards as modern remnants of more ancient fortune-telling cards, and card play itself as a “pejoration of ancient divinatory technique,” insisting that “seeing the future is certainly crucial in card games, too,” the primary example of gambling in his works is not cards but roulette and its particular mode of reading the table (*das Brett lesen*). As we might expect from the previous examples of reading fate and handwriting, this reading is primarily performed by the player’s body, what in this case Benjamin calls motor innervation “emancipated” from the interfering (but also present) promptings of rational waking consciousness (*rationale Wachbewusstsein*). Motor innervation is to be understood not in terms of a discrete subject (i.e., as the communication between a brain and nerves) but rather as a special connection between the player and the table, what Benjamin calls a telepathic contact (*ein Kontakt telepathischer Art*). Crucially, this telepathic contact, which allows the successful or *glücklich* player to divine the winning number, is between him and the ball—the rolling ball—and not between the player and the croupier who puts the ball in motion: the telepathic sympathetic link is not with the human world but with that of things, animated moving things. Indeed, just as with the promptings of his own rational consciousness (his own self), the player
must fend off or parry the interfering, “hostile suggestions” generated by his human environment in order to remain open to the communication of the object world and its winning number—or, as Benjamin also puts it, to contact with the realm of fate where all the winning numbers already are. In fact, Benjamin supposes that this human world, and more especially his own rational consciousness, are what keep the realm of winning numbers hidden (versteckt) to the player: at the level of bodily sympathetic contact at least, every winning number is known in advance, and it is only when the player proceeds intelligently that he becomes blocked from this advance knowledge.

The distinction that Benjamin insists on between the promptings of consciousness and those of the body (or metonymically, the hand) are familiar to us, both from what we already know from Benjamin—in what he says about reading fate and handwriting, but also what he says elsewhere about consciousness and trauma, or consciousness and Erfahrung—and what we know from ancient divination and the reading practices derived from it. But the distinction is also at the basis of another, less familiar distinction Benjamin draws, one crucial to deciphering his particular take on divination and its relation to the future. He addresses this point not only in his works on gambling, but also in one of his most explicit and extended pieces on divination, the section “Madame Ariane” from One-Way Street (Einbahnstraße): both are crucial to his notion of magic reading. In his works on gambling, Benjamin claims that when a winning number is clearly predicted (klar vorhergesehen) but not bet on (besetzt), the genuine gambler will recognize that he must stop playing: “For it is a sign that the contact between his motor innervation and ‘fate’ has been interrupted. Only then will ‘what is to come’ (das Kommende) enter into his consciousness more or less clearly as what it is.” In “Madame Ariane,” Benjamin declares that “omens, presentiments, signals pass day and night through our organism like wave impulses. To interpret them or use them: that is the question. The two are irreconcilable. If we fail to [act and so use the omen, then] and only then the message is deciphered. But now it is too late.” In both examples, a particular temporal gap based on a broken physical (albeit invisible)
connection has created a distinction within divination itself, one in which the telepathic reading of signs qua omens and consciously knowing what is to come (the future) are indeed acknowledged as legitimate possibilities, but only in a context in which the latter is no longer useful or timely.\textsuperscript{61}

Against such reading qua future-telling, Benjamin poses a form of divination based on what he calls presence of mind, or, more precisely, bodily presence of mind (\textit{leibhafte Geistesgegenwart})—insisting once again on the body as the first, most ancient, and most reliable instrument of divination.\textsuperscript{62} Crucially for us, he still insists that this presence of mind partakes of the future, is, he says, its extract: it still represents an inner intimation of what is to come (\textit{eine innere Kunde vom Kommenden}).\textsuperscript{63} It is just, I suspect, that it represents a different kind of knowing from that based on (belated) consciousness, and a different kind of “future” from that based on sequential temporality—very much as with the different kind of temporality first broached in “Fate and Character,” one that aims to make this time simultaneous with another (not present).\textsuperscript{64}

By reintroducing the issue of temporality to magic reading—both the idea of futurity and that of the difficult coordination or intersection of two different temporal dimensions—Benjamin also reintroduces the issue of occasionality and, with it, that of happiness as well. He notes that the genuine gambler (\textit{der echte Spieler}) places his most important and usually successful bets at the last possible moment (\textit{im letzten Augenblick}), for “it is only at the last moment, when everything is pressing toward a conclusion, at the critical moment of danger (of missing his chance),” that the ability to “read the table” shows up (\textit{sich einfindet}).\textsuperscript{65} This \textit{Zeitmoment}, this sense that there is but one specific instance in which the true signs (the winning number) appear to the player and become legible, unhiddden, present, is dependent on two factors: danger (I want to say, hazard) and acceleration.\textsuperscript{66} The former, of course, is familiar to readers of Benjamin, adumbrating as it does the more famous formulations of the “Concept of History” essay and recalling that already mentioned in “Fate and Character”: the particular danger that threatens the player lies in the fateful (\textit{schicksalhaft}) category of arriving too late, of having missed the chance: it speaks
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to Benjamin’s well-known belief about the historical/temporal conditions for a moment from another time—whether of the past or the messianic/divine—to be grasped in the present, as a present with future force. But the latter factor, acceleration or Beschleunigung, is less familiar, although just as central to Benjamin’s concept of both gambling and magic reading per se. Benjamin says that gambling produces the lightning-quick process of innervation at the moment of danger—a process we will later see him explicitly compare with the tempo, swiftness, and rapidity of reading (and writing: handwriting)—that shuts down or outpaces the processes of rational consciousness and its ordinary, progressive temporality, and so creates the occasion for the unimpeded openness to telepathic contact or sympathetic connection with the nonhuman object world, its communication, and its other temporality (its other meaning). Acceleration, we might say, inflects the nowness, the occasion of the present moment, with a kind of future thrust, and in such a way as to produce the borderline case (Grenzfall) in which presence of mind becomes divination—which Benjamin calls one of the highest, rarest moments in life (in dem Geistesgegenwart zur Divination wird, also einen der höchsten, seltensten Augenblicke des Lebens).

The gambler’s reading, then, of this “hidden” (versteckt) world of signs is dependent not only on an open boundary between himself and the nonhuman world, freed from the promptings of the rational human world, but also on a particular occasion that alone opens up that boundary and provides that freedom—an occasion itself dependent on an accelerated temporality to transform its mere presence into magic divination.

In calling the moment of divinatory reading one of the highest and rarest in life, Benjamin underscores what is at stake for the gambler qua reader: happiness or Glück. And in doing so, he returns us not only to one of the defining conditions for magic reading in the ancient world—or for that matter, in Fontane’s sociable moment, and even, too, that happy moment of Stimmung in Keller that has Heinrich rejoice at Anna’s coffin—but also to the question he himself left open in “Fate and Character” and returns to repeatedly in his own work (and not only, but also, in the context of reading). In the earlier essay, Benjamin wondered whether Glück
had any relation or Beziehung to fate, and seemed to suggest that
the answer was no: Glück was about being fateless, freed from the
Schuldzusammenhang of the creaturely connection to natural life.
Here his answer seems somewhat different, though he retains the
same basic terms and does not really abandon his earlier position,
either. Here, Benjamin focuses on the Glück and Glücksgfühl of
the successful gambler, whose happiness and fortune result from
the sense “of being rewarded by fate, of having grasped it, and
being embraced by it.” The loser, on the other hand, is someone
who has lost his relation or contact with fate, who has (fatefully)
missed the chance, the singular occasion, for realizing Glück. To
be sure—and returning more to the language and position of the
early essay—Benjamin also stresses that once the game is over, the
loser experiences a sense of release or relief (Erleichterung) at hav-
ing somehow escaped fate, at having lost the connection, whereas
the winner is burdened by the peril to which his success and happi-
ness have exposed him at fate’s hand. As we will see directly, this
failure on the part of the loser and his missed chance have a special
place in Benjamin’s thoughts, insofar as they can still hold out, in
however weak a form, a promise of happiness redeemed, a future
fulfillment that can reconcile his “irreconcilable” distinctions be-
tween immediately acting on omens and reading them belatedly,
and so, too, between the fortunes of the winner and loser. But the
emphasis here, in the context of gambling as a mode of divination,
is certainly on the happiness in the moment itself, in all its power
and peril; a happiness derived from divination and tied to a special,
singular occasion, which is also to say, a mode of reading derived
from the special connection between the player’s present and the
world of fate, mediated by animated moving things.

Childhood

The last of the three spheres in which Benjamin makes his early
studies in magic reading is childhood. It is here that the affinity with
Hesse’s model of reading is most pronounced (and so it is hardly
surprising that Hesse was so openly enamored with Benjamin’s
writings on childhood). And it is also here that, for many reasons, those early studies prove most important. First, because it is in this sphere that Benjamin most directly addresses the practice of reading not palms, cards, handwriting, or roulette tables, but actual books. And he does so in a highly personal way, consistently approaching reading as an experience in which the self and its happiness are equally at stake. Second, because like so many of his contemporaries—and most notably Freud—Benjamin tends to conflate ontogeny and phylogeny, and so to equate childhood experience with that of primitive and ancient cultures. Hence, many of his most direct investigations into the magical experience (magische Erfahrung) that he claims binds together ancient cognitive modes with modern times focus in the first place on the child.

Third, because it is here that, for the first time, Benjamin’s notions of a natural, material, fateful, and telepathic connection or contact between the human subject and the world of things come to be formulated in terms of a logic of mimetic relation, linkage, and exchange—a logic of resemblance and connection that secures the strongest resemblances and ties between his take on magic reading and the sympathetic world order that we have traced from its earliest formulations through to the recent past of the late nineteenth century. That this order is once again the basis for divination and still grounded in Benjamin’s focus on the body can be seen in how he moves from calling the naked body the first and most important instrument of divination to the body as the first and most important site for the exercise of what he now calls the (child’s) mimetic faculty. Once again, we will see the genealogy of magic reading extending well into the modern era, and that of Stimmung (qua sympatheia) extending well beyond isolated psychologized subjectivity.

But fourth, and in addition to these points that pertain to childhood itself, Benjamin’s investigations into the magical experience of the child are also always self-reflexively into the experience of the memory of that experience—into the reading of that past—and this is itself important in at least two ways. Most significantly, the focus on remembering childhood allows Benjamin, as it did so many of his modernist contemporaries—including Proust, Freud,
and, in a slightly different manner, Eliot—to relocate and reintroduce the practices of divination into the one sphere left open by the otherwise accepted ban on future knowledge. Memory becomes a form of divination, wherein childhood experience, events, and objects are read not in, of, or for themselves but as omens of a future, which in the present can be either already past or itself the present with future force. Memories become, as it were, “prophecies projected backwards”: childhood is approached as the same type of retrospective domain or medium as history or literature, with the same complex temporal schemata and dimensions that turn all such reading into divination, a trafficking at once with the dead and the future alongside the engagement with the original time of the remembered, encountered moment itself.77

Two passages from Benjamin’s works describe this backward-looking divination in particularly eloquent fashion. One addresses images, the other sounds; one is concerned with the childhood of photography, the other with the childhood of the author himself. The first comes in “Little History of Photography” (Kleine Geschichte der Photographie), in a meditation on an early photograph of Karl Dauthendey and his fiancée, who later committed suicide:

He seems to be holding her, but her gaze passes him by, absorbed in an ominous distance. Immerse yourself in such a picture long enough and you will realize to what extent opposites touch here, too: the most precise technology can give its products a magical value. . . . The beholder feels an irresistible urge to search out such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has, so to speak, seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may discover it.

Sie ist hier neben ihm zu sehen, er scheint sie zu halten; ihr Blick aber geht an ihm vorüber, saugend an eine unheilvolle Ferne gehetzt. Hat man sich lange genug in so ein Bild vertieft, erkennt man, wie sehr auch hier die Gegensätze sich berühren: die exakteste Technik kann ihren Hervorbringungen einen magischen Wert geben. . . . Der Beschauer [fühlt] unwiderstehlich den Zwang, in solchem Bild das winzige Fünkchen Zufall, Hier und Jetzt, zu suchen, mit dem die Wirklichkeit den Bildcharakter gleichsam durchgesengt hat, die unscheinbare Stelle zu finden, in
welcher, im Sosein jener längstvergangenen Minute das Künftige noch heut und so beredt nistet, daß wir, rückblickend, es entdecken können. 78

Adumbrating in an almost uncanny way Roland Barthes’s notion of the punctum, the passage also echoes the divinatory practices of old. 79 We have the initiating, participant desire or wish on the part of the present reader, the stress on the chance (Zufall) that opens up the possibility for the other communication to occur, and an equal stress on the present occasion (Hier und Jetzt) required for that opening, that communication with the dead; where that punctum, that tiny spark of contingency, is peculiarly charged with a future force that makes its reading divinatory—albeit a future and reading that do not extend into the future of the reader himself.

The future divined in this photographic image is, in fact, itself a past, what Barthes will call an anterior future; that at stake in the second passage has more of a presence—indeed a double presence that differently inflects its divination, even if still backward looking. The passage comes in Berlin Childhood around 1900 (Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert, 1934), in the section “News of a Death.” 80 Benjamin is considering whether the phenomenon of déjà vu wouldn’t better be spoken of in audial terms, as like an echo:

The shock with which a moment enters our consciousness as if already lived tends to strike us in the form of a sound. It is a word, a rustling or knocking, that is endowed with the power to call us unexpectedly into the cool sepulcher of the past, from whose vault the present seems to resound only as an echo. Strange that no-one has yet inquired into the counterpart of this transport—namely, the shock with which a word makes us pull up short, like a muff that someone has forgotten in our room. Just as the latter points us to a stranger who was on the premises, so there are words or pauses pointing us to that invisible stranger—the future—which forgot them at our place.

Although still decisively a matter of retrospection, the divinatory experience here has a somewhat richer presence, enriched by the future twice over. On the one hand, the ominous moment sounding out from the past strikes its recipient in his present, and in being made present transforms that present into its own re-sounding future. On the other hand, the past moment itself, in its own present, is charged with a sense of its own futurity. As Benjamin says of that remembered childhood moment, “I [took] special note that evening of my room and my bed, just as a person pays closer attention to a place when he has a presentiment . . . that one day he will have to retrieve something forgotten.” Admittedly, this presentiment is only fully realized later, retrospectively (“Only after many years did I learn what that something was”). But such is the characteristic paradox of this backward-looking form of divination: as Eliot will put it, “We had the experience but missed the meaning, / And approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form.”

There is a second, related way that this relocation of divination and of the future into the past (and especially, though not exclusively, the past of childhood) is important. Broadly speaking, it has to do with the redemption of that past, something found in Eliot as well. More narrowly, it has to do with the promised possibility of reconciling Benjamin’s two irreconcilable distinctions between acting on and reading omens or presentiments, of reconciling those moments—the gambler’s moments—of missed chances and failure with those other moments of success and fulfillment, and so, too, of reconciling the apparent contradiction opened up in the gambling essays about the happiness of the winner and loser, redeeming the latter’s (past) miss in the former’s (present) lucky hit. This is an aspect of backward-looking divination hinted at in Benjamin’s recollection of the too-late arriving child (more anon), but it is most
famously formulated in the second thesis of the late essay “On the Concept of History.”

Benjamin argues here that our idea of Glück is indissolubly bound up with the past, but the past understood as the missed chances of our lives: people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. Present happiness depends, as it were, on their redemption; on divining the past missed moment, now seen as charged with future promise—where the divining itself depends on the present wish for happiness as the demand made of the relation to the past. Glück depends on realizing the similarities that link together past and present moments in noncausal, transformative relation: “In the voices we hear, isn’t there an echo of now silent ones? Don’t the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize?” Our present Glück becomes their future fulfillment, a future and a fulfillment (a happiness) only possible because of the missed chance of the past, and a divinatory reading of that past based on the recognition of its future redemption. Which is to say, reading becomes a form of acting and of the future: the missed chance, the lost Glück, the past failure becomes the precondition for a divined and realized future—albeit a future that is now, in the present.

Elaborating further on the divinatory quality of memory in Benjamin threatens to take us too far afield from our immediate concern—or rather, too far ahead of our argument. What I want instead is to return to the points about childhood experience proper that are most indispensable to our topic, namely, those directly related to reading and earlier modes of magical thought, and then see how the features of memory just described reappear in this more defined context. I’ll do so by concentrating on a few short sections from One-Way Street (1928), especially “Child Reading” (Lesendes Kind) and “Child Hiding” (Verstecktes Kind). These sketches incorporate some of Benjamin’s earliest preoccupations with children and their relation to both books and the world of things: they form, too, the common ground for his later, far more extensive depictions of childhood in Berlin Chronicle (Berliner Chronik) and Berlin Childhood, as well as for the image of the
child he (like Hesse) will evoke in other essays as the modern avatar of ancient magic.

Child Reading

“Child Reading” foregrounds two aspects of childhood reading that bespeak its magical dimension: the initiating demand and the sense of “mystical participation” that Miriam Hansen refers to as “mimetic blending.” The one-paragraph vignette describes the experience of a child in the lower classes of his schooling: it begins with the weekly distribution of books from the library, dispensed by seemingly invisible hands. Although the allotment itself appears governed by chance (or perhaps fate), it is accompanied by a wish on the part of the child, one that is often thwarted but on occasion “at last” granted: it then becomes attached to the essentially chance adventures of the presented (won) book and functions as the shaping force for the child’s reading. That reading is in crucial ways never quite the reading of the text itself; rather, the coincidence of his wishing self with the text opens up a realm of significance over and above the simple, generally available context of the text, a realm that can be read only by him—a modern variant of *biblicae sortes*.

As Benjamin says, the content of the book “did not much matter. For you were reading at the time when you still made up stories in bed. The child seeks his way along the half-hidden paths.” That is, the child seeks to read his own stories in or out of the text, a process that distorts and transforms its ordinary meaning content, which for this reason is “not so important.” And he reads these stories not so much at the level of plot as in the swirl of letters (*im Wirbel der Lettern*) that function “like figures and messengers” from the enveloping text-world that covers him “like snowflakes.” This reading requires a porous boundary between the child and text: as much as its form of signification depends upon identification, it also requires a dissolving participation, or blending, that disperses the ordinary unity of the child-subject every bit as much as that of the book. As Benjamin puts it, the child’s breath becomes part of the air of the narrated events, and
all the participants breathe it; the child is mingled (gemischt) with the characters.91

Clearly, this model of the child reading is, in both outline and detail, similar to both the earlier traditions of magic reading described in this study’s general introduction and the version of Hesse’s cited at the beginning of this chapter. But it also differs in subtle but significant ways from the latter (from Hesse), and in a fashion that aligns it more closely with the former (with the ancient traditions of sympatheia). The differences from Hesse can initially be glimpsed in the preceding paragraph, in how the child’s reading is not only, or fully, a matter of projection onto the text, in which the text itself all but disappears, but is rather a more intrinsic matter of mutual relation and exchange (Wechselwirkung). Seemingly occupying an unmarked space between Hesse’s second and third mode, Benjamin’s child’s reading is actually radically distinguished by being essentially nonpsychological in nature and, rather, based on an epistemology that is ontologically, metaphysically, and socially grounded in its understanding of both the subject and the thing world (Dingwelt), both the child and his book.

To fully understand Benjamin’s model of the child’s reading requires confronting his models of both the child’s mode of cognition and the objects of its engagement—which is to say, both the child and children’s books. In a series of early essays, Benjamin describes the child’s distinct (but then linked) relations to color and form, and then similarly to pictures and words; and he describes the different kinds of books by which the child learns to read, is trained in the development and synthesis of his varied relations to the world of books, moving from colored to black-and-white picture books, and from ABC primers with personified, vocalizing, or figural letters to illustrated lexicons with words and pictures placed next to or substituting for each other—all leading up to the kind of adventure stories at the center of “Child Reading.” The progressive, unfolding course of this book series constitutes at once the reading habits of the contemporary individual child and, more broadly, those of European culture itself from the early modern period through the nineteenth century (the heyday of children’s literature) up to Benjamin’s own modernist moment. And although
he continually stresses the singularity of the child’s mode of reading, both his ontogenetic and phylogenetic models imply that the reading experience of the modern adult is a complex compound not only of loss but also of retained (or recovered) traces of that earlier mode. Similarly, although he several times emphasizes that children’s books do not introduce children directly into the world of objects, animals, and people, into so-called life, he does suggest that they induce them, and so too adults, to perceive a world behind or beyond the ordinary apparent order (beyond the “blotchy skin of things”) that has its own claim, an even fuller claim, to being the world—or to completing the world, with its inclusion of the magic side of things.92

We begin with the child’s view of color and form and the picture books that are connected with it.93 Benjamin argues that the child’s relations to color and to form are fundamentally distinct, a circumstance often supported in early children’s books by the great autonomy between its coloring—whether by the illustrator or the child himself—and the graphic medium of woodcut or engraving. The relation to color is considered primary, even originary: it is based solely on the sense of sight, isolated from all impressions of a given object formed and synthesized—that is, “known” in a more or less conscious, derivative way—from the other senses of touch, taste, smell, or sound. To this extent, color is something immaterial, spiritual (geistig) but still sensual (sinnlich), detached from but still attendant on the world of objects, or represented objects, or, as Benjamin also puts it, “applied” (angelegt) to objects in a way that avoids absolute synthesis.94 But to an equal extent, color is also what connects the child directly to an original realm of being, nowadays all but lost to reading adults. Variously described by Benjamin as similar to the Platonic anamnesis and as paradisial, the experience of color directly links the child to the “spiritual heart” (geistigen Gegenstand) of each object: even as it cancels out the merely intellectual connections or Verbindungen synthesized from the other senses defining the object itself, the discrete focus on color realizes a different set of “connections,” a different “interrelated totality”—without, Benjamin adds, thereby sacrificing the world.95 He calls this other interrelated totality “the pure
Stimmung” (die reine Stimmung): it is another modern version of sympathemia, albeit at this stage at least accessible only to the child and otherwise lost (to the conscious adult) and, in this formulation, not fully synthesized with the material object world, but somehow out of sync and distorting.96

It is, then, by way of color that the child first enters into his reading, and in such a way that the boundary between his person and the text all but dissolves, allowing for the type of absorptive blending key to magic experience. As Benjamin puts it,

The child enters into those pages, becoming suffused, like a cloud, with the riotous colors of the world of pictures. Sitting before his painted book, he makes the Taoist vision of perfection come true: he overcomes the illusory barrier of the book’s surface and passes through colored textures and brightly painted partitions to enter a stage on which fairy tales spring to life.

Im Schauen dringt [das Kind] selber als Gewölk, das mit dem Farben- glanz der Bilderwelt sich sättigt, in [die Seiten] ein. Es macht vor sei- nem ausgemalten Buche die Kunst der taoistischen Vollendeten wahr: es meistert die Trugwand der Fläche und zwischen farbigen Geweben, bunten Verschlägen betritt es eine Bühne, wo das Märchen lebt.97

To some extent, it is unimportant whether the pictures here were colored by the illustrator or the child itself, or whether we imagine the child as absorbed into the text or immersed in a dream state within itself.98 The indifference is due in part to the effaced boundary between active and passive, object and subject, in this mode of reading, but in part, too, to the mutual reciprocity of their affective relation. For, on the one hand, given the gap between colors and their objects mentioned above, whether by the illustrator or the child the colors are always “applied” (angelegt) to the depicted objects in the book as an other, attendant, and differently ordered realm that cuts across their ordinary organized form (not hidden, but differently there), and thus, for all the “completion” of the absorption into the text, the text remains a distorted world—distorted by the child’s discrete and pure view of color. On the other hand, Benjamin also suggests that this porous, outpouring realm—this “cloud at the core of things”—distorts the child in turn: as he says of his painting in Berlin Childhood, “The colors I mixed
would color me.” As with *Stimmung* or *sympatheia* proper, the movement of projection and introjection is always reciprocal: as Simmel put it, it is a matter of relation, of *Wechselwirkung*.

This play of distortive, transformative, and similarizing reciprocity is even more pronounced in the child’s relation to form in picture books. It is a relation that Benjamin insists is fundamentally distinct from the child’s relation to color—and he adds, on the way to words. As we said, the experience of form is something derived from impressions generated by and synthesized from senses other than just sight, and especially by and from touch. It is based in the first place on the materiality and externality of objects in ways not quite true of the immateriality and im-position of color. As Benjamin says, if the colored picture immerses the child in a dream state within itself, the form of the black-and-white woodcut, the plain prosaic illustration of the picture book, leads him out of himself: much as with the posited materiality of letters in handwriting, drawings are assumed to have a body of their own that connects them, as objects, to the greater external world of things and nature. And the child responds to that bodily form of pictures with his own body in a way impossible with color, which, we’re told, the human body cannot produce. As Benjamin says, “All form, every outline that man perceives, corresponds to something in him that enables him to reproduce it,” and that something is his body, which he (Benjamin) designates as the organ of active relations and as the medium of the child’s reading, which, he says, is always a form of enactment.

This reproductive enactment also works in reciprocal ways, in both directions powered by and aiming toward similitude. On the one hand, the child “reads” drawings by making itself similar to them, in a way that manifests a porous boundary between the child and the world of things based on their common ground in bodily materiality—and in a way that is at once transformative and distortive of the child (more anon). On the other hand, the child is also compelled to reproduce the similarizing impression that the drawing has made on him at the site of the drawing itself, an active response on the part of his body, one that in turn transforms and distorts the original drawings, in ways meant at once to complete
them and, Benjamin notes, to turn their mute form into language (again, more anon).\textsuperscript{103} The child “scribbles” (\textit{kritzelt}) on the uncolored drawings, draws or writes the bodily impressions the objects have made on him in his own bodily way on them: they touch him, and he (re)touches them.\textsuperscript{104} This is, as it were, the inchoate equivalent of the language of the body that joins with the body of language in handwriting, here more disjointedly perceived; it shows, too, the basic equivalence of reading and (proto)writing in Benjamin’s schema, where reading is always an active process of mutual inscription.

The term “scribble” leaves it unclear whether Benjamin imagines the child’s scrawling to be in black only or to include coloring as well. If the latter, then something of the child’s connection to an original immaterial nature and “pure Stimmung” (and the child’s happiness in that connection) would be thought to infuse the material similitudes those scribblings produce. This would seem to be implied by the description of reading practices cited above, where the way of “applying” colors carries over to the child’s reading of adventure stories, where colors proper no longer figure.\textsuperscript{105} In any case, he does make clear that the child’s scribbling encompasses both drawing and writing, both visual material pictures and immaterial symbolic language, in ways that impart to both the character of hieroglyphs: ushering the child into a world where every image or thing has a word or text behind it, and every word, even letter, remains both an image and a thing.\textsuperscript{106} And if on this road to language and reading proper Benjamin leaves us somewhat in the dark about the continued presence of the pure realm of color, he does speak up about another realm of pure nature: sound.\textsuperscript{107}

The early ABC primers that follow after the colored picture-books in teaching the child how to read begin by reinforcing this conflation of word and image, sign and material, keeping every word and even letter a hieroglyph tied to the world of things quite apart from or before any added sense or meaning (\textit{Bedeutung}). The very earliest of these reading primers were, Benjamin tells us, voice-books (\textit{Stimmenbüchlein}), with pictures of letters based on onomatopoeia, where \textit{R} is a growling dog, \textit{S} a hissing snake, \textit{Sh} a woman shooing hens.\textsuperscript{108} Letters are images—indeed things—connected to
the greater world of things based on the similarity of sound, and although now the “pure Stimmung” of color seems absent from the equation, its place is filled by the “voice” (Stimme) or “natural sound” (Laute der Natur) that inhabits the picture-word qua onomatopoeia.109 Much as did color, sound serves to connect the child to an original im/material realm of being before language or representation proper, a realm similarly serving as the basis for the realization of a different set of connections between objects and between words as objects, a different interrelated totality, resting now on the sympathetic similitude of sound alone.110

These Stimmenbüchlein, Benjamin says, soon give way to other things, both historically (after the Counter-Reformation) and in the education of the individual child—although it would be more accurate to say that they become complemented by other things, much as the child’s engaged reading in terms of color becomes joined to that of form.111 That is, the ABC primers come to present the child with the “majesty of script, full of clouds of arabesques,” or more to the point, where letters are introduced “in disguise” (vermummt), as it were: F appears as a Franciscan, C as a clerk, P as a porter.112 Although no longer linked to the greater world of things purely on the basis of (pure) sound, letters are thus presented to the child in the first place as things, animate things, as “characters” and bodies; as picture puzzles to be read visually for a significance differently organized from and all but independent of any word in which they might subsequently appear, even if only appearing along with such a word—and again, not so much hidden as just differently present.

In this respect, the image-sign of script functions much like the sound quality of language, opening up another realm of communicative connection and correspondence, another realm of similitude beyond that of either ordinary experience or ordinary language. And this occasions a mode of reading that Benjamin explicitly compares with the occult, magical, allegorical readings of the early modern period, linking the next stage of ABC primers to the emblem books of the baroque, and in particular to Johann Amos Comenius’s Orbis sensualium pictus, whose system, arrangement, and method come “straight out” of Campanella’s
book of magic. Benjamin describes children’s books from the end of the eighteenth century that show, “on each page, a motley collection of objects without any pictorial connection between them,” a “higgledy-piggledy still-life that seems mysterious until you realize what . . . Apple, ABC-book, Ape, Airplane, Anchor, Ark, Arm, Armadillo, Aster, and Ax are all doing in the same place.” All begin with the same letter of the alphabet—with the same sound and image-form—and “not unlike Baroque pictographic combinations of allegorical objects,” they initiate the child into a magic mode of sympathetic reading, drawing linking seirai or associate chains of similitude that function invisibly over and above either the manifest images of the objects themselves or the semantic significance of their sociate words.

In many ways, these emblem-book-like ABC primers, in which letters connect otherwise arbitrary objects and images—and to say it again, it is because letters are themselves objects and forms (and through sound, nature) that the child himself connects with them, reads their bodies through the enactments of his own body, quite apart from any intellectual engagement—are a culminating moment in the child’s initiation into magic reading. But in other ways, they are the beginning of its demise—its loss for the adult and, inevitably, for the present day as well. On the one hand, these books have induced the child, even if not consciously (and more by way of anamnesis), to detect in every word or letter an image and sound and object that keeps it a hieroglyph, suggesting another order of meaning or relation within or beside the “sense” of the ordinary context, an order in which he himself is essentially participant. This mode of reading was further nurtured by the books of rebus—a word Benjamin uses to link res or thing and rêver or dream, and derives from the hieroglyphs of the Renaissance—that appeared in the nineteenth century, the heyday of children’s literature. These latter books taught children to engage in the turnstile substitution of words and images, to read for “hidden” combinations and meanings beyond the apparently given; even as the “magic books” (Zauberbücher) that appeared at this same time assured that the picture puzzle would constantly change, and the Anziehpuppe or “dress-up” books that the child could actively participate in the
change (through the application or *anlegen* of different costumes on the provided figures, a concrete variant of the child's earlier *anlegen* of colors). All this persists as a mode of reading even as the child graduates to his nonpictured (and silent) reading of pirate stories or ghost stories, or whatever book chance might put in the schoolboy's hands, immersing himself “in the swirling letters like figures and messages in drifting snowflakes” (also called “sounding” [tönende] snowflakes). And it persists, too, in however weak or submerged a form, in the adult reader as well—for this is how he has been trained to read, individually and historically.

On the other hand, these emblem-like ABC primers—and with them the rebus books “in which wherever possible all the nouns are represented by small beautifully painted illustrative or allegorical pictures”—also signal the beginning of the tendency “to separate the visual as far as possible from the word, and even more from the letter.” Word and image, letter and thing, are no longer presented as one unified element: where there is an image or object, there is no word, no language; and where there is a word or letter, there is no picture or thing. Even as color seems to disappear from the reading experience, and with it the direct natural connection to an immaterial realm of “pure Stimmung”; and even as sound (or *Stimme*) seems to disappear in now silent reading, and with it another connection to pure nature and its other order of things; so too does the image and its object-ivity seem to fade away, and with it the natural bodily connection that (literally) draws the reader into a sensuous, even if non-“sensical” relation to the text. But never completely: the sense of its loss persists in the form of a certain longing (*Sehnsucht*) or even guilt (*Schuld*) in the adult, and in however faint, distorted, or momentary a fashion, it looms as a substratum, as a potentially irruptive force in the child’s future as an adult.

Child Hiding

The second section from *One-Way Street* is “Child Hiding.” It does not directly address reading, but it does expand upon the concept of the world that supports or underwrites it and on the child’s
mode of participation in it. It is a mode that Benjamin elsewhere describes as the natural heritage of mankind in its early stages, functioning now in an unbroken manner only in children. It is, I’d say, a reformulation of the basic connection between the subject and the natural world of things (die Dingwelt) that we saw behind his analyses of fate, handwriting, roulette playing, and children’s books, and it reformulates it in a way that recasts that connection in terms most reflective of the earlier traditions of sympatheia—namely, in terms of an almost ontological logic or logos of analogy and similarity, resemblance and relation, that is key to magic’s mode of both signification and identificatory participation.

In making this connection to the tradition of sympatheia, even as Benjamin is reaching far back to the ancient world, he is also extending the transformations of that same tradition in the nineteenth and early twentieth century that we mentioned earlier: the transformation of sympatheia into Stimmung in Keller; of Stimmung into sociability in Fontane; and the key place of something like sympatheia in the vitalist philosophies of Benjamin’s immediate predecessors, such as Klages, Bergson, and their less reputable occult counterparts in theosophy and anthroposophy. And as important as the resurrection of the ancient tradition is, so, too, is the transformation of the more recent one. So, for example, in almost direct contrast to Fontane, the sympathetic order is established by the child absent other people, in a more or less isolated, even alienated relation to the human world. “Child Hiding” describes a child playing hide-and-seek, but without others, alone in a room filled only with nonhuman things—a table, curtain, door—with which he engages: as in the case of interfering, “hostile suggestions” generated by the gambler’s human environment, the exclusion of others, rather than, as in Fontane, their presence, seems the necessary condition for the experience of sympatheia.

This is not to say that the social dimension simply dissolves and yields to a connection with the natural world, such as still seemed possible in Keller, was yearned for anew in Fontane, and was so problematically reclaimed by the vitalists. Nor is it to say that the child in its alienation becomes psychologically or even individualistically conceived. Rather, the world of things with which the child
is linked is overwhelmingly a humanly produced one: in “Child Hiding,” although only lightly sketched, the site of the game is clearly a formal dining room in the child’s bourgeois parental home, a dwelling in which “one is sure to find everything as it was (beim alten).”¹²² The object world working its binding magic on the child is still a social one, largely keeping the child detached from a more naturally conceived order; indeed, as the beim alten indicates, the social world embodied in that object world is in important ways still the same nineteenth-century bourgeois world as in Fontane, and problematically (arrestingly) so.¹²³ As with children’s books, these “things” (table, curtain, door) are complicit in a certain historicized socialization of the child over and above his natural relations, and both the social and the natural characteristics far outweigh any individual “character” of the child—as in “Child Reading” and other such vignettes, the child hiding never obtains a first-person pronoun that might distinguish him psychologically: he retains the neuter es.

Another point where Benjamin’s transformation and extension of the more recent tradition are notable concerns the place of mimesis in the production of the sympathetic world. This is most evident in the comparison with Keller’s realism, and on two fronts. On the one hand, whereas in Keller mimesis took place at the site of painting, as a medium mediating between the human subject and the (natural) world, in Benjamin the mimesis takes place more directly, without any mediation at all—or rather, with the thing world and the child’s body as part of that world as the medium of mimesis itself. Gone is the sense of in distans; in its place comes a much greater sense of vulnerability to the active force of things, a far greater range to one’s immediate “mimetic” relation to the Umwelt. On the other hand, whereas mimesis in Keller was based on relations of model and copy, of visible and sensible similarities—this tree and this drawing, this child and this portrait—in Benjamin the realm of similitude is no longer limited to such sensible appearances, and this vastly extends and transforms both the mode of mimesis and that of the sympathetic order that supports it. The child can be like a curtain or door: similitude is no longer restricted to verisimilitude.
One last preliminary point of extension, and perhaps the most important one. Whereas in Keller the achievement of *Stimmung* was considered the goal, the fulfillment of its realist ideal; and similarly, in Fontane the achievement of *Stimmung* in the form of *Geselligkeit* was the desired magic, and the threatened loss of sociability and, even more, the realized loss of sympathetic connection to the nonhuman natural world seemed sadly to signal the demise of the realist order; and whereas even in Benjamin himself, the adult’s loss of his childhood’s magic reading or the gambler’s loss of his sympathetic connection to the realm of fate are both presented as just that, lamented losses of a once possessed and still desirable state—in “Child Hiding,” this loss is also explicitly celebrated as a positive gain, as a desired condition. The realist poetics of connection give way, as it were, to those of a more modernist detachment. Not that this desire is completely new or unexpected. In Keller, the demonic and deadly force of *sympatheia* was retained in his model of *Stimmung*, and emerged most evidently in the binding magic worked on Meretlein and Anna (where there was, however, no clear path of escape). In Fontane, the breakdown of the social fabric supporting sociability was looked on with sporadically muted approval by Dubslav. And even in Benjamin, we’ve had both the “fateless” gods of Hölderlin (mentioned in “Fate and Character”) and the “relief” of the losing gambler to counter the happy child and fortunate player. No doubt part of this more pronounced affirmation of the loss of *sympatheia* can be attributed to the increased antipathy toward the (aging, arrested) social order, now embodied in the thing world. But as our brief discussion of memory (or our linking it to missed chances as losses) also suggests, the affirmation of loss, especially of lost connections, might also be attributed to an expectation of belated recovery: to a future and a moment of happiness that might still be magically met.

“Child Hiding” describes the game of hide-and-seek, and both hiding and seeking are at stake in the vignette. But it begins with the hiding, or rather with the child’s part in a hiding (*versteckt*) world, even as he otherwise seems right there, in plain sight; it is as it were about the invisible dimension of the visible world and the child’s place in it—a world that is differently present. This world
in whose hiddenness he comes to share (in which he is “enclosed” [eingeschlossen]) is, we’re told, the material world, die Stoffwelt, a variant of die Dingwelt (perhaps somewhat more pejorative). Although we’ve seen this participation to be key throughout Benjamin, it is especially so for the child: Benjamin argues that childhood chains us to things (uns an die Dinge kettet) at a level and time that precedes human influence, knowledge, and even language. The formative power of those chains—the force of things themselves—impresses itself on the child, and in such a way that he is made to become the things, or rather similar to the things, surrounding him. It is because of this imposed form of mimicry that the child all but disappears, dispersed or bound into his Umwelt:

Standing behind the doorway curtain, the child himself becomes something floating and white, a ghost. The dining-room table under which he is crouching turns him into the wooden idol in a temple whose four pillars are the carved legs. And behind a door, he himself is the door.

Das Kind, das hinter der Portiere steht, wird selbst zu etwas Wehendem und Weißem, zum Gespenst. Der Eßtisch, unter den es sich gekauert hat, läßt es zum hölzernen Idol des Tempels werden, wo die geschnitzten Beine die vier Säulen sind. Und hinter einer Türe ist es selber Tür.

In a later and more famous passage—“The Mummerehlen” from Berlin Childhood—Benjamin adds examples from the photographer’s studio, where “we made ourselves . . . like the embroidered cushion someone pushed toward us, or the ball we had been given to hold.” Even more suggestive for us, he adds there as well the example of the child making himself similar to words read or heard, where language is once again positioned as itself part of the material world. It is, notably, a kind of “likeness” that is anything but manifest, and a kind of mimicry that remains entirely invisible and unseen. Still, the child’s connection to the world is based on a sympathetic logic of contact and likeness that involves at once a binding identification with the object world and a (releasing, disappearing) dispersal of identity into that world.

In this formulation of the child’s place in the sympathetically contagious order of similitude, the transformative powers emanate out of things themselves, and potentially threaten the child every
bit as much as aid him (aid him precisely in allowing him to disappear, to be ghosted). As Benjamin’s child puts it elsewhere, “I am distorted (entstellt) by my similarity to all that surrounds me.”

Here, the sense of danger is no doubt linked to the fact that the Stoffwelt of the parents’ dwelling embodies the nineteenth-century culture the child is anxious to escape, and whose “everything as it was” (alles beim alten) thus threatens, in binding the child, to arrest him (much as her sartorial trappings did Meretlein). But however specifically nineteenth-century that Stoffwelt seems, it also awakens in the child an ancient, primitive sense of the demonic—the Dämon, as Benjamin calls it—that inhabits its (more recently “ancient”) things, a sense conveyed by references not only to the demon, but to the door as mask, the dwelling as a whole as an arsenal of masks, and the child himself as a wooden idol in a temple. This “fore-world” (Vorwelt) or “primal history” (Urgeschichte) that irrupts into and out of the present/past setting (Benjamin also calls it Stimmung) awakens the almost atavistic play of forces behind mimesis that keeps it active and potently magic. But these forces do not emanate only out of things, do not only distort the child and bind him: the mimetic faculty is in him, too; it distorts, transforms, or disappears the Stoffwelt itself, and is the source of his own magic power. It determines his role as a shaman or Zauberpriester, able to bewitch (behexen) the world and make it anew.

We see this in how the table that transforms the child into a wooden idol is itself transformed into a four-pillared temple: it becomes ent-stellt, dis-placed from its own material present into another realm via mimetic resemblance. The child joins in, becomes an active participant in the play or game (Spiel), and so, too, becomes not just a hider in but a seeker of similitude, and in ways that fundamentally transform his relation both to the thing-world and to the demonic forces, social or otherwise, they embody. Thus, although Benjamin stresses elsewhere that the play space or Spielraum and its things presented to the child “belong to the nation and class [it] comes from”—part of an adult world that is always “as it was,” outmoded and arrested—it is precisely in such a setting that children “recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. [And] in using these things, they . . .
bring together materials of widely differing kinds in a new intuitive (sprunghaft) relationship. Children thus produce their own smaller world of things within the greater one.” The child becomes the producer—or better, the seeker and diviner—of another world hidden in the material one, a spectral world of likenesses and relations.

Benjamin addresses this active role of the child in the section immediately preceding “Child Hiding,” entitled “Disorderly Child” (Unordentliches Kind). This child is presented as a hunter of things—stones, flowers, and butterflies, but also tinfoil, bricks, and pennies—and for him, every single thing “makes up one great collection.” Strictly speaking, however, he does not seek out things, but rather “the spirits whose trace he scents in things” (die Geister, deren Spur es in den Dingen wittert). In order to capture (or release) these spirits, the child must first wrench them out of the greater, ordinary order in which he finds them, must, he says, disenchant them (entzaubern)—but his disenchantment is in the service of a reenchantment, his disordering in the construction of a different order. That is, for the child and in ways invisible to adults, these “things” are not only themselves but things they resemble, the similitudes scented in them: tinfoil is hoarded silver, bricks coffins, cacti totem poles, pennies shields. Even more, for the child, and again in ways hidden to others, these apparently scattered, random, “dis-orderly” things brought together in his room constitute an order, a structure that holds them in their other, spectral significance, a significance that disappears when only ordinary order is imposed (by the “sensible” adult, ordering “tidy up” [Aufräumen]). The child seeks the similitude in the thing, and the order that—as much as the thing itself—determines the similitude (e.g., would the penny be a shield were the chestnut not a club?). And he himself is part of that order, one of its invisibly transformed things: it is this that makes him a shaman (Zauberpriester) and his world bewitched.

Two additional points about this mimetic faculty in the child. The first is that the hidden similitude that the child divines is not static or single: the table needn’t always be a temple, the cactus every time a totem pole. Indeed, as Benjamin says, “However unified and unambiguous the material is, the more it seems to embrace
the possibility of a multitude of figures of the most varied sort.” Unlike in realist mimesis (or even realist Stimmung), a thing is never just like one other thing, or like in only one way. Rather, like the characters in Benjamin’s graphology, the dresses in children’s books, the letter A in the primer or all things allegorical in the baroque, the order of similitude and significance is an endlessly open one. And in keeping with that, the similitude that the world of things imposes on the child proves just as mobile, just as open: the table might turn him into a wooden idol, but the curtain turns him into a ghost, the door into a door, or as he writes elsewhere, sand turns him into a baker, a wagon into a horse.

And yet, for all the plurality and mobility present to the child in this invisible world within the world to which he is so intimately connected, he nonetheless still fears its binding powers, its demon—and this not only insofar as those forces derive from the dreaded social imaginary of the nineteenth century, nor only insofar as they leave him vulnerable to manipulation or arrest by some other “shaman” (“Anyone who discovers him can petrify him as an idol under the table”—again, think of Meretlein). Rather, it is even the case of the binding power of his own mimicry on himself: “When he makes faces . . . all the clock has to do is strike, and his face will stay like that forever.” And so part of the game consists in driving out the demon who has so transformed him: just as when writing about fate (and for the same reason), Benjamin seems to celebrate both the connection with the world of things (and the invisible world behind the world of things) and its loss: both the magic powers to which the child has access through the connection, and the disenchantment or release that comes from its severance. The mimetic connection that on the one hand seems to lift the child out of his ordinary time and place and into an enchanted non-presence (an Ent-stellung) on the other threatens to keep him in that Ent-stellung, that fate, forever—and the magical world is desired only in its momentariness, its singular occasion, and not its duration. And so as with the gambler who loses or Hölderlin’s “fateless” gods, being freed from the chain of mimetic relation is for the child also a welcome, desired relief—indeed, Benjamin writes, the “hiding” child actively seeks his deliverance, the loss of
his place in the “hidden” world of similitude. In this way, the la-
mented sense of nonrelation to the natural world broached in Font-
tane’s “sociability,” along with the increasing break with the social 
Umwelt itself, is here finalized or taken as a good thing: a triumph 
of detachment over connection, of disenchantment over magic.138

This is not to say that the severance of these binding chains 
is the end of the story, is, as it were, without second thoughts. 
Rather, as with the adults who can no longer so immediately and 
easily be mingled with the characters in their books, there is also 
a sense that the loosening of these connections is truly a loss. But 
this loss, this loosening, proves to be the necessary condition for a 
new, more typically modernist sense of the occasionality of “magi-
cal experience”—and of happiness: an epiphanic occasionality far 
more rare than the almost always available situational reading of 
ancient divination, more complex than the simply present moment-
tariness of sociability in Fontane or Stimmung in Keller, and more 
layered, too, than the one-off momentariness desired by the child 
mentioned above.139 This occasionality involves a new, different 
version of hide-and-seek, and a different order of hidden simili-
tude: looking not for like things but for like times—for the future 
hidden in the past.

That moments of sympathetic connection are still both valued 
by and possible for the modern-day adult can be seen in an ex-
ample Benjamin repeats almost verbatim across several essays.140 
He writes, “Modern man can be touched by a pale shadow of this 
[magic connection to things] when he looks through a mask, or 
when, on southern moonlit nights, he feels mimetic forces alive in 
himself that he had thought long since dead, while nature, which 
possesses them all, transforms itself to resemble the moon.”141 Ben-
jamin calls these moonlit moments “rare moments” (seltene Au-
genblicke), and they seem very much the same as those rarest mo-
ments (seltenste Augenblicke) of divination that, he says, gambling 
can produce, and to carry with them the same nascent promise of 
Glück—a sense of being touched and rewarded by fate.142 Nota-
bly, the passage evokes the mask, seemingly the same mask worn 
by “child hiding” that transformed him into a shaman (Zauber-
priester); and the nature evoked as the center of mimetic powers
is seemingly again the nature of the ancient, “thought long since dead” world. However, when Benjamin adds, “But [modern man] is transported into this very force field by his memories of childhood,” this field seems as emphatically the present memory as the past childhood, a shift (or Entstellung) reinforced by the reflective moon and shadows as the condition for connection with sympathetic, mimetic nature. In other words, memory itself becomes an active site—in some ways, the site—of the mimetic faculty for modern man, seeking the similitude to his present hidden (masked, reflected, and shadowed forth) in the past, with his bliss-producing divination of the future based on the same logic of likeness that the child or ancient brings to the things of his world, but now temporally cast and practiced by the adult, on himself, in his present-day.

Two passages in Benjamin are particularly suited to elucidating this relation between the divining memories of childhood, the future of things, and the belated experience of Glück. The first is from one of the earliest essays, the section on the diary in “The Metaphysics of Youth” (Metaphysik der Jugend, 1913); the second is from the concluding sentences of “Child Hiding” itself. The first is one of the most portentous pieces in Benjamin’s oeuvre, adumbrating in condensed and cryptic form many of his later key concepts. It is concerned with the role of the interval—the break—in the diary, and how it figures in both the fate and the future (the “resurrection”) of the subject and the event-full world that surrounds him. In an especially lyrical moment, it designates that world as, significantly enough, landscape (Landschaft), and describes it as imbued with the same external agency we saw in the Stimmung landscapes of Keller and the childhood thing-world of Benjamin himself:

As landscape all events surround us, for we, the time of things, know no time. Nothing but the leaning of trees, the horizon, the silhouetted mountain ridges, which suddenly awake full of meaning because they have placed us in their midst. The landscape transports us into their midst, the trembling treetops assail us with questions, the valleys envelop us with mist, incomprehensible houses oppress us with their shapes.

Als Landschaft umgibt uns alles Geschehen, denn wir, die Zeit der Dinge, kennen keine Zeit. Nur Neigungen der Bäume, Horizont und

Reading Magic in Walter Benjamin
The new and complecting aspect of this is the inserted temporal dimension to the sympathetic relation between the active world and encompassed subject (“we, the time of things”), a dimension stressed further when Benjamin adds, “Things perceive us: their gaze propels us into the future. . . . We encounter nothing that is not in landscape, and in it find nothing but future.” And it continues in his description of the essentially reciprocal moment of this arrangement, in the participant shaping force of the human subject:

Knowing no answers but forming the center, we ascertain (bestimmen) things with the movement of our bodies. By drawing nigh and distancing ourselves once again on our wanderings, we single out trees from their like and flood them with the time of our existence. We give firm definition to (bestimmen) fields and mountains in their arbitrariness: they are our past existence—that was the prophecy of childhood. We are their future.

Und wie wir antwortlos mit der Bewegung unseres Leibes die Dinge bestimmen, Mitte sind und uns wandernd fernen und nähern, lösen wir Bäume und Felder aus ihresgleichen, überströmen sie mit der Zeit unseres Daseins. Feld und Berge bestimmen wir in ihrer Willkür; sie sind unser vergangenes Sein—so prophezeite die Kindheit. Wir sind zukünftig sie.

What grounds and explains the structure behind this prophetic relation (and Bestimmung) between the self and its landscape is the fundamental context of that relation, namely, the diary, and especially two of its determining features. The first is the interval itself, which abrogates the continuum of developmental time (die Zeit der Entwicklung) and opens up a non-time that breaks its binding chain of experience (Kette der Erlebnisse); and the second is the self not as writer but as belated, back-turned reader of the diary, the temporally distinct place where, in Benjamin’s elegant phrase, we befall ourselves (uns selbst widerfahren). The interval helps explain the role here of the movement of our bodies: shifting
the animating mobility associated with divinatory signs from the object to the subject, this movement is about both connecting with the past (drawing nigh) and disconnecting from it (distancing once again), a disconnection in which, by virtue of the interval, the past landscape falls out of its original, ordinary connection with the subject. Instead, the subject as reader returns to that landscape anew, from his position in its future: and it is from this re-moved position that he ascertains (bestimmt) things, “singles out trees from their like” by flooding them with the time—the present time—of “our existence.” He ascertains or bestimmt them from the perspective of how they are retrospectively seen to have prophesied his present self—it is in this sense that he declares, “Past things have futurity” and “All future is past”—and he defines this new connection of the landscape to the subject (“this countermovement of things in the time of the self”) as both fate and prophecy. And its realization in the moment of reading, of looking back with an eye to the future—“that time of the self in which things befall us”—that is the time and place of fulfillment, of what he calls resurrection (Auferstehung): when the past, in its likeness to the present, finds future life, afterlife, in a moment of mimetic reflection.

The second passage that sheds special light on the relation between divining memory and the future of things, and both in relation to the landscape of childhood, comes in the concluding sentences of “Child Hiding.” It too is concerned with resurrection and, if you will, redemption. Benjamin has just concluded explaining the child’s need to “drive out the demon” to prevent itself from being bound forever in the magical, mimetic realm of its dwelling (qua an “arsenal of masks”), and to preserve instead the open moment of the “magical experience”:

Yet once a year—in mysterious, secret places, in their empty eye sockets, in their fixed mouths—lie gifts. Magical experience becomes science (Wissenschaft). As its engineer, the child disenchants the gloomy parental apartment and looks for Easter eggs.

Doch einmal jährlich liegen an geheimnisvollen Stellen, in ihren leeren Augenhöhlen, ihrem starren Mund, Geschenke. Die magische Erfahrung wird Wissenschaft. Das Kind entzaubert als ihr Ingenieur die düstere Elternwohnung und sucht Ostereier.
Everything hinges on that “yet” (doch), at the moment—with its time shift—wherein the child moves from being the hidden one to the seeking one, from “magical experience” to Wissenschaft, from shaman to disenchanting engineer. Everything, that is, hinges on seeing how this shift is at the same time to describing the work of memory as well as the game of childhood, to establishing the connective correspondences between the two that transform the one into a hidden allegory of the other—into a mimetic moment in a new way—and in the process revealing the identity (the similitude) between the child and the grown-up, the magic and the science: the one hiding in the other’s seeking; the one a mask for the other to look back through and see his present self, his present work. That is, it hinges on divining how the “gifts” hidden in secret places include this memory itself, liberated from its binding connections in the seemingly empty, dead, dusty, and fixed past (those binding connections that kept it past, and so fixed), and, once so released or entzaubert (much like the things of the “disorderly child”), available for new hidden connections, new mimetic connections, a new and different “arsenal of masks”; with a future of which they become a prophecy, a fate, hidden and revealed, in a state of resurrection and redemption. This, I suggest, is why these gifts are Easter eggs: at once dead (cooked or empty) and fertile, at once past childhood things and potent signs of future life—where the grown-up has found another kingdom hidden and present in the first magic kingdom of childhood, another, reflecting moment in the shadows of this otherwise lost sympathetic world.

On Reading as Such (Reading Old & New)

Benjamin’s most direct and comprehensive musings on magic reading (magische Lesen), indeed his take on its specifically divinatory dimension and on the sympathetic world that supports it, come in his essay “Doctrine of the Similar” and its somewhat later, abbreviated version, “The Mimetic Faculty,” as well as in several, even shorter precursor essays. As a set, these essays differ notably from Benjamin’s earlier studies of language and its magic that
are couched in more ahistorical, exclusively metaphysical and religious terms. Instead, these later texts are written from the vantage of “students of ancient traditions” and seek to integrate his thoughts on graphology, gambling, and childhood into the tradition of ancient magic reading, and to derive therefrom the terms for a “new reading” (neues Lesen) appropriate to his own modernist moment—both in the resurgence of the archaic (Urgeschichte) and in the disruptions that transform it.\(^{153}\)

Because they are couched in such different terms, the early studies of language and magic are not as directly relevant to us as the later ones. But especially the essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man (Über die Sprache überhaupt und die Sprache des Menschen)” has aspects that are crucial to understanding the rest of Benjamin, including the later language studies, and that, even if indirectly, impact his model of modernist reading—for while the early studies draw on a Judeo-Christian tradition and the later ones more on a Neoplatonic one, both of course are entwined in the early modern period that so deeply textured Benjamin’s take on modernism itself. In any case, the aspects of the early work that are most important to us are the direct focus on language itself, including the language of things; and the description of the conditions that have dislocated or entstellt our relation to the language of things, indeed to language itself.

In “On Language as Such,” Benjamin claims that “the primary problem of language is its magic,” by which he means the immediacy of its communication in its connection to things.\(^{154}\) This leads Kathrin Busch to suggest that even in this essay the magic at stake is a sympathetic one, whose communication or “contagion” conveys effects that are not “necessarily present or representable,” but where “something else beyond the named content is given expression, something akin to a mood or atmosphere (Stimmung) that is neither semantic nor communicable at the level of word meanings.”\(^ {155}\) This communication takes place in the first instance between and among things themselves, quite apart from the human: it does so through a more or less “material community” (stoffliche Gemeinschaft) that is immediate and magical—for, as Benjamin says, “there is also a magic of matter.”\(^ {156}\) This is, we note,
a somewhat different claim from that made earlier in relation to handwriting and children’s books, where we said language has a body, or rather, a decisively material existence: the claim here is that the material—nature, things—has a language (albeit a mute and so imperfect one).\textsuperscript{157} Man himself partakes of the magical community (of this \textit{Stimmung}) insofar as he, too, is material; but human language is incomparable (\textit{unvergleichlich}) in that its magical community with things is said to be immaterial.\textsuperscript{158} Again, this is somewhat different from our earlier point, that the human body has a language that expresses itself, and closer to the point about how children, in reproducing drawings with or through their bodies, also transform them into words. Here, however, rather than emphasizing the smoothness and continuity in that transformation, the stress seems to be on the disjunction and difference at stake.

In fact, these two conditions—that things themselves have a language, albeit an imperfect one, and human language communicates “magically” with things, albeit on a different, immaterial footing—form the basis for the distortions inherent in both language itself and our relation to things, and Benjamin takes recourse to the biblical story of Creation and the Fall to explain this. Things have a language because Creation itself—nature and all its things—is the embodiment of God’s creative Word: what a thing “is” corresponds exactly to the divine word that both made it and knew it.\textsuperscript{159} In its original Adamic state, the name or word given to a thing by man corresponded to that divine word and hence thing, precisely because man, his knowledge, and his gift of language were of the same divine, creative word.\textsuperscript{160} But with the Fall—both into knowledge (a fatuous knowledge distinct from that earlier “magical” knowledge of correspondences, one grounded in self-consciousness and so too in guilt) and into multiple languages—the Adamic correspondence of the divine word embodied in things and the human name given them no longer holds.\textsuperscript{161} Instead, the relation between the names given to a thing by human languages and the name the thing had from God and retains in its silent, magical communication with other things becomes a matter of “overnaming” (\textit{Überbenennung}), “the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy.”\textsuperscript{162} Again, this seems rather different from the language of the body
that melds with the body of language in handwriting—for there we
do have connection, based on a shared material community—and
closer to the child’s scribblings that overwrite the book’s draw-
ings: the split between signifier and signified that becomes the (hi-
eroglyphic) ground for allegory. There is still, Benjamin insists, a
certain magic to human language in the “externally communicat-
ing” words and correspondences it produces: but how or whether
this magic and these correspondences correspond with the magical
community of things themselves and their language is essentially
unknowable. The sympathetic world, the “magical community
of things,” is there, but not, or no longer, for us, at least not for our
language(s) and consciousness. And with it seems to go any direct
route to divination, leaving us with only our material bodies, our
lost bliss, and, Benjamin adds, the central metaphysical problem of
linguistic philosophy: revelation.

When Benjamin returns to the topic of language and its magic
in “Doctrine of the Similar,” many elements remain the same, but
some emphases have notably changed. What remains is the posing
of the question of “the magical side of language” in terms of the
connections or correspondences of the human and world of things,
and the insistence on the losses and distortions to those connections
occasioned by what, in the earlier context, Benjamin called the
Fall. What has changed is basically twofold: the divine dimension
has dropped out of the analysis, and a different temporal dimen-
sion has entered in, with history in its extension now performing
the work of loss and change earlier attributed to a single biblical
event. Both developments have enormous consequences for the fate
of divination or magic reading. Rather than framing his analysis in
Judeo-Christian terms, with an inaccessible divine language as the
determining factor affecting present-day reading, Benjamin turns to
ancient traditions of natural magic absent any explicit, or required,
meta-physical foundation. This allows him to foreground the di-
mension of magical community and shared language between man
and the world only hinted at in “On Language as Such,” but un-
derwriting his take on fate, graphology, gambling, and childhood:
the magical community and language of matter, and man himself
as matter. And the introduction of time—not just in its character as
a diachronic operator in a synchronic system (the “Fall”) but in its
greater fullness as movement and change—allows for the twinned
possibility of precisely those two experiences denied in the earlier
eyssay: divination and Glück.

Benjamin’s new starting point in ancient traditions of occult
knowledge helps explain why he now approaches language, and
especially reading, by way of similarity. His first formulation of
this approach comes in a fragment entitled “On Astrology,” and
it begins with the rather Neoplatonic claim that the similarities we
perceive in the world are nothing more than “tiny prospects from
a cosmos of similarity” (winzige Teilansichten aus einem Kosmos
der Ähnlichkeit) scattered throughout the material visible world
that hint at vast invisible chains of likenesses. That is, even as
in the earlier essay he began with language as a property of the
magical community of matter, so here he starts with a conception
of similarity as a natural, macrocosmic principle. This principle
is active in and between things quite apart from human projec-
tion: similarities are not only imported into things by chance com-
parisons on our part, but all of them “are the effect of an active
mimetic force working expressly inside things.” This force estab-
lishes an open network or force field—a chain or weave—of con-
nection in which each thing functions both as an active produc-
tive center or subject, generating its similarity to other things, and
as a passive receptive object, accepting or accommodating itself
to other things qua centers; and in which the points or features
within each thing as subject or object that might invite relations of
similitude with others are multiple, indeed unlimited. It is this hid-
den, woven world of endlessly combinatory similarities that pro-
duces the “natural correspondences” that are also “magical cor-
respondences”: as in the case of the material community in “On
Language as Such,” magic is first in nature, in things, or rather, in
the connection between things. It is just that the foundation of
“language” has been reformulated in terms of likenesses in ways
that more closely resemble the conditions of sympatheia, of Stim-
zung, and even, in its community and reciprocal relationality, of
Simmel’s sociability (although realized here in the complete ab-
sence of humans).
The recognition of these similarities by humans might, Benjamin says, be limited, and is certainly more so in the present day than it was in ancient times. But when these similarities were recognized by men, this was not so much by virtue of their rational consciousness or even visual perceptions as it was by that of their shared participation in the web of resemblances. That is, the human being, like every other thing, participates in the community of resemblances as both mimetic subject and object, generating via the shared force within it its similarity to other things and accepting into itself the similarities produced by other things (qua subjects). This implies for man, originally, a kind of dispersed, broadcast, scattered web-identity inseparable from his unified bound connection with things—similar to what we saw for Meretlein and Anna in the Stimmung-determined world of Keller, or for the “sociable man” in the more narrowly conceived communal world of both Simmel and Fontane.

Benjamin describes this associative, reciprocal relation in explicitly archaic terms, as the magical, sympathetic resemblances between the human microcosm and nature’s macrocosm. And he illustrates the archaic mode of divinatory reading based on this micro-macro relation with the example of physiognomy. While in both its ancient and its modern forms physiognomy considers bodies as legible signs of “something else” that is otherwise hidden but still determinative and binding, it is only in its recent degraded form that that “something else” is the realm of individual psychological character. In its more original form it was devoted to divining the hidden connections and resemblances that bind the natural life in man to the external world. Benjamin underscores this with his very first example of the mimetic sensibility in “On Astrology,” which describes the ancient practice of reading human physiognomy in terms of animal resemblances, itself a first step toward the more radical reading of the stars as animal beings, and from there to stars as connected back to human beings. As in ancient extispicy and modern-day graphology, this mode of reading sees the human in the nonhuman world, which is then mirrored back onto the human as a way of knowing it. But because it is based not in a discrete human epistemology but instead in a shared natural ontology, this
mode also divines more than the discretely human world and its
self-reflective similitudes: it also reads or divines the nonhuman in
the human, sensing man’s connection with and similitude to ani-
mals, stars, and the whole external world of things in ways that
far exceed mere rational cognition or visual perception: “non-sens-
uous” (unsinnlich) correspondences that belie the more humanly
restricted psychology, and similarities, of the present day.

Both the ancient physiognomic and astrological divinations de-
scribed by Benjamin are not only of similar things in the external
world but also of moving, animate things; and in intimate con-
nection with that movement, Benjamin stresses that the success-
ful reading of these similar things, the successful connection of the
microcosmic human with the macrocosmic thing-world depends
on a particular occasion, ein Nu, ein Zeitmoment, that can coor-
dinate the movement—the time—of things with that of the human
subject. Using the same language deployed earlier to describe the
gambler’s connection to the rolling ball and, through it, with the
realm of fate, he says that the recognition of the realm of similarity
is in every case bound to a “flashing up”: “It flits past, can possibly
be won again, but cannot really be held fast as can other percep-
tions.” This is the same occasionality that obtains in the ancient
practice of kledonomancy that Benjamin refers to here, wherein the
reading of chance words or events as omens is singularly dependent
on their coincidence or similarity to the occasion of the reader him-
self. And it is the same occasionality that Benjamin also ascribes
to astrological reading, where, he says, it is the addition of a third
term (das Dazukommen eines Dritten), the astrologer himself, to
the conjunction of two stars that allows him to recognize the sud-
den fleeting appearance of a constellation; it is the connection or
similarity of his own occasion, his own momentary condition, that
allows him to read the connection between the two objects and di-
vine the order—the mimetic character—that makes them a constel-
lation. Without the occasion of participatory identification or mi-
metic blending based on this coincidence, “the astrologer is cheated
of his reward, despite the sharpness of his observational tools.”

We stated at the outset that, in the ancient world, magic reading
was also always occasional reading, dependent on participatory
identification to produce or perceive signification, and this was true again in our two nineteenth-century examples: the moments of *Stimmung* in Keller, the premonitions in early Fontane, and especially the moments of sociability in late Fontane, where the sense of ephemerality of the occasion, conveyed in part by its basis in movement and time flow, seems newly pronounced. But the temporality at stake in such occasional reading is even more pronounced in Benjamin’s schema. We see this in the way the animation of signs is more insistently tied to movement and movement to temporality. We see it in how the coordination of the different realms required for magic reading is more emphatically one of different temporalities as well: where not only the hidden realm behind or beyond the present reality is conceived as temporal (whether in its form as the messianic, the past, or the heavenly movement of stars), nor only in the conception of the reader himself as fundamentally temporal (as in the figure of the diary reader, or childhood-remembering adult), but also with the occasion of their coordination itself as decisively, and even perilously, its own time, its own *Nu*.

All this matters. But what most impacts the occasionality of modern magic reading is the phylogenetic equivalent to Benjamin’s claims about the reading child turned adult: that the human micro-/macrocosmic connection with the world of things, “the natural heritage of mankind in its early stages,” has become all but lost to modern man. For Benjamin, this means that such magical connections become occasional for him in the new sense of becoming exceedingly rare, far rarer than in antiquity or its ontogenetic equivalent in childhood. But he also insists they can still happen, and apparently without the divine intervention needed for revelation in his earlier, more theological model: in those “rare moments” of mimetic experience on southern moonlit nights, or those “rarest moments” of divination for the gambler, or in those back-turned moments of resurrection for the diary reader or childhood memoirist—each of which seems to carry the same nascent promise of *Glück*: a sense of being rewarded by fate. What needs to be determined, then, is how these changed circumstances (the weakening of mimetic perception, and with it of the bond to the greater world of things) change magic reading and the sympathetic
connections that support it, and how these rare moments of divination are still possible, not for the ancient astrologer or the contemporary child, but for “modern man.”

Benjamin insists that even with the loss or vast reduction of the human connection with the world of things and so, too, with the natural correspondences that exist between things quite apart from ourselves, the impulse to magic mimetic thought, once stimulated and awoken, does not disappear. Rather, in some form of dislocation (Entstellung), removed or disconnected from the natural correspondences, it continues to function “in other fields.” He singles out two such sites for this dislocation or relocation. The first is the unconscious, distinct from the natural body (as the natural life in man). That is, the former connecting mimetic force seems only to have disappeared from our conscious perceptions and to have been lost in or to our natural bodies; but the human unconscious still perceives and produces similarities and chains of similarities out of the things of the external world and the subject’s relation to that world. As mentioned, Freud also recognized the affinities between the unconscious associational dream logic of condensation and displacement and what Frazer calls sympathetic imitation and contagion, and Benjamin seems to follow him in positing both this relocation and persistence of magical reading in the unconscious—although unlike Freud he does not restrict its activity to dream-sleep or the mentally aberrant, but rather assumes its constant activity alongside and in excess of our ordinary waking cognition.

The importance of the Freudian unconscious to the modernist mode of magic reading we’ve noted before. But we also noted Benjamin’s resistance to psychological models, and his differences from Freud. These emerge again when we consider whether Benjamin thinks the associational chains produced by the human unconscious line up or coincide with the natural correspondences produced by the cosmos itself—which, unlike Freud, Benjamin posits as existent. It is hard to say with certainty. On the one hand, Benjamin describes the natural cosmos that produces its correspondences as one of infinite similarities, which makes it difficult to imagine similarities that fall outside of it. On the other hand, the
gap between the two seems one of the determining differences between Benjamin and the vitalists (as earlier the mystics), and moreover seems required for those truly magical occasions (those southern nights or winning throws) where such a happy coincidence is momentarily realized. That is, much like the distortion or dislocation described in “On Language as Such” for the postlapsarian break between the divine, natural, and human realms, Benjamin’s model here for the modern-day adult appears to entail a disconnect between the two orders of magical similitude—for even in the earlier essay he stressed that the reading of things produced by human consciousness was “equally magical,” just incommensurably different and so distortive of the magical community inherent in things themselves.\textsuperscript{177} The introduction here of the new realm of the unconscious would seem to entail a disconnect not only between the conscious and the unconscious, but also between the unconscious and the body qua “a natural life in man.”\textsuperscript{178} And this would hold true whether the unconscious was conceived as discreetly individuated in the subject’s psyche or collectively socialized in the subject’s object world: in either case, we are left with a state not of similarity per se but of what Sigrid Weigel perceptively calls “distorted similarity” (entstellte Ähnlichkeit).\textsuperscript{179}

The other site to which the impulse toward magical thinking has become dis- or relocated for Benjamin is language, in both its spoken and written forms, which brings the question of magical thinking and the world that supports it back to bear on reading as such—or rather, comes more or less to restrict it to the case of reading as such (das Lesen schlechthin). As Benjamin admits, language has always been included as a privileged site for the appearance of magical signs, carrying some other meaning via similitude, and in both its spoken and its written forms. We have only to recall the case of the servant’s (spoken) words in Homer, or of Homer’s own (written) words in the Neoplatonists, in both of which words behave just like other animate things in conveying some other, divine significance that cuts across or through the ordinary logic of their immediate context; or the case of sociable “small talk” in Fontane, which similarly supported another, spectral significance and sense of connection behind or beyond its apparent manifest
subject-matter; or, of course, that of Benjamin’s own reading child. But the magic of language at stake for Benjamin’s world also differs from that in both the ancient and the child’s, and for the same reason as it differs for Fontane’s—or more immediately important, for the same reason as the associational chains of the unconscious also might differ from those of the cosmos itself.180 The direct connection of language to the world of things has been lost: even as human consciousness, and unconsciousness, have become separate from things, so too have words, including from the very things they represent. As Foucault puts it, words and world fall apart.181

Benjamin insists that words are no longer directly similar to things they signify. Although in “On Language as Such” this was still the case for Adamic language, and in the accounts of ABC primers something similar seemed suggested for the earliest children’s books, this is not the case for the language of modern man. Still, even in its dis-located, dis-connected state, Benjamin does say that the imitative associational force of human thought continues to assert itself in language qua its own, discrete archive, repository, or kosmos of similarities. In the case of spoken words or Sprache, this manifests itself in its onomatopoetic dimension, at the level of sound. While he keeps his distance from the “most primitive” mode of onomatopoetic explanation that assumes a direct and singular similarity between sound and sense, signifier and signified, he still accepts the assertion that “every word—indeed the whole of language—is onomatopoetic.”182 We already encountered his description of children’s voice-books (Stimmenbüchlein), where the initiation into letters was based on onomatopoeia, providing a social, individual ground for this claim; we also heard his description of language in “Trauerspiel,” where alongside the signified meaning of a word came the “natural sound” by which nature itself strives for expression, thus providing a more material, metaphysical ground for the same assertion. But the present argument—for the present-day adult—is more than or different from this: the point here is that whereas sound and sense are not, or no longer, necessarily connected between signifier and signified, word and thing, they are between words themselves, within language itself; where similarities in sound between words of seemingly unrelated
meaning generate “sense” over and above their ordinary, merely agreed-upon sign value.183 As Benjamin puts it, “The nexus of meaning (Sinnzusammenhang) which resides in the sounds of the sentence is the basis from which something similar can become apparent out of a sound, flashing up in an instant.”184

We have a fairly straightforward example of this, from Berlin Childhood, in Benjamin’s reading of the name (and it is significant that it is a name, onoma) of his childhood teacher, Helene Pufahl, where the P was the p of perseverance, the f of faithful and fruitful, and so on—taking the connotative over the denotative dimension of names we saw already in Fontane and breaking it down, as in more ancient times, to the level of letters and their acoustic connotations.185 And we have “distorted” examples of this from the same work, in which the child’s mishearing of certain words (Mark-Thalle, Mummerehlen, Kupferstichen) leads to connotations, connections, and meaning different from their ordinary denotations, and based instead on the (distorted) similarities of sound.186 These examples are, however, also somewhat misleading, or distortive, of Benjamin’s intent here, insofar as they entail only single words and set “other” meanings, overlooking the syntagmatic, open-ended, and ever-changing dimension of language that also determines its onomatopoetic activity; indeed the same emphasis on movement and temporality—including convoluted temporality—that distinguished Benjamin’s model from that of the French and Klages for signs in graphology.187 Rather, in this model of onomatopoeia, words and letters as sounds become, as it were, their own mimetic subjects and objects, generating and accepting their similarities to all other word- or letter-sounds, and producing through the back-and-forth (the echoing and adumbrating) movement that alone creates the similarities and so, too, the mutually animating signs an attendant, parasitic sense out of those connections, or resemblances, over and above but also in interaction with the ordinary sense and connection of the words—a magical play of similitude quite apart from any magical play of similitude that might directly connect language to the natural world, the world of things. And although it begins to feel like overload, we need to add that this acoustic order of similitude is both apart from and in
interaction with the different orders of similitude not only in things themselves and in agreed-upon linguistic meaning but also in the human unconscious: the sympathetic cosmos has not only fallen apart but multiplied, and with it the opportunities for mutual interaction and distortion.

In the case of written language, the magic aspect of language also continues to assert itself, here at the level of the image. Not surprisingly, Benjamin turns to graphology to illustrate this other, visual level of significance, recalling how handwriting generates picture puzzles (Vexierbilder) that convey another, unconscious meaning (in)visibly alongside the semantic content of the words themselves—images that “appear” not so much in the form of individual letters or words but rather, as in the sound play of Sprache, in the interplay and movement between the various graphemes. However, as in the discussions of graphology proper, and even though the vocabulary is insistently Freudian, Benjamin is again not content simply to stay at the level of the individual or the unconscious in considering what that “something else” is that script might signify. And this is all the more so here, where the object is not an individual’s handwriting but writing itself. For this reason, the earlier discussion of children’s books (also alluded to here) seems the more revealing reference, where he described how letters were first introduced to children “disguised” (vermummt) as image-figures: this would suggest a nonpsychological, sociohistorical training in such “magical” image-reading for the modern-day former child.

But Benjamin’s argument again reaches still farther back in time, into primal history (Urgeschichte), and, he admits, to more mystical theories of language and ancient orders of magic. That is, he heuristically accepts that originally written letters themselves—quite apart from any individual rendering and long before the comparatively recent tradition of children’s literature—were thought to possess mimetic properties, signaling relations and associations independently of the words in which they found themselves (or even more expansively, words independently of their sentences), functioning like hieroglyphs, runes, or the “characters” of the Neoplatonists. It is in this context that he offers the example of
the Hebrew letter beth (ב) as the root of the word for “house”—a much stronger claim than that letters, too, are things, animate things, and so connected to the greater world of things. Rather, letters are posited as originally similar to what they represent, as directly connected to the thing world not just materially but also as active and receptive parts of its mimetic network.

Still, as in the case of the onomatopoetic property of spoken language, Benjamin is not claiming that contemporary script retains those original mimetic relations, the “natural correspondences” to the signified external, let alone divine, world: this seems all the more the case as Benjamin’s focus is on a historically more recent phonetic alphabet, on script signifying sounds. Rather, his claim is that like, but also separate from, spoken language and quite apart from individual unconscious projection or specific sociohistorical training, graphic language retains “magical” mimetic forces embedded in itself and communicated by suggestive similarities within itself—even once cut off from outside external reference. The simplest (but also most static, and also most unsinnlich) of these new similarities is going to be that between the shape of a given letter (Schriftbild) and the sound it is “like,” such that the graphic element will participate in the back-and-forth movement of echoes that produces its acoustically carried ancillary meaning. But there will also be a separate, compounded such play between the graphic elements themselves (the pdbq, the mnuw, etc.) that multiplies the competing or colluding orders of similitude interacting with and distorting each other—and this again on top of any imagistic similarities added by social training, the unconscious, or even the world itself. This seems to be why Benjamin repeatedly refers to language as an archive of similarities, a sequestered repository of stored experiences in material form; but also why he says the similarities will be produced “every time in a new, original, and underivable way”; an interaction between the sympathetic, associational orders of material language, both acoustic and visual, and both conscious and unconscious, individual and social, but all also severed from the “natural” correspondence of things, and of the body as directly connected to things. 191

Even in this cut-off, self-referential, divided, and multiplied condition, then, the magical properties of language and its reading
persist, as does the essential doubleness of the magic reading experience we’ve observed before—albeit again in somewhat different form. In antiquity, the magical significance of the “stars, entrails, and coincidences” singled out by Benjamin was always attendant or parasitic upon more ordinary systems of signification; similarly, in Keller, the metatextual was attendant upon the realist representation, and in Fontane and Simmel, the same condition held for the sociable significance that emerged spectrally behind the apparent trivialities of small talk. So in Benjamin, this magic side of language is always in complex, interactive, dependent relation to “something alien, precisely the semiotic or communicative aspect of language,” on whose basis alone it can appear. But unlike in antiquity, there is no hidden world—either of things or behind things—to which these signs refer; even as unlike in Keller, there seems no metatext behind the text, or unlike in Fontane or Simmel, no sociable community, let alone “life,” that the signs connect to. Rather, they seem only to refer back to, to turn back on, the immediate, manifest meaning of language itself. But as a kind of compensation for this delimitation, Benjamin claims that now all reading (alles Lesen) is always at once this double reading, bringing the material similarities of sound and image to bear on the semiotic content, producing conjunctions of sound, shape, and sense that first give meaning to the first two (and in this very different from antiquity) and give a second, added meaning to the last, which thus is never “just” itself.

Benjamin describes this double reading as a combination of Ablesen (reading off) and Herauslesen (reading out from) that responds to and combines the two different aspects of language (semiotic and “magical”). Its designated doubleness is, however, somewhat deceptive: not only because, as we’ve seen, the nonsemiotic realm of language has multiplied and fractured in ways that can be difficult to reduce to a single unified order, but also because, as we know from earlier in the essay—and know as intended here precisely through those similarities in sound and phrasing being addressed—this double reading is more precisely a triple reading, with the doubleness of its signs only manifest, interpretable, or readable (herauszulesen) with the addition of the third term: the
occasion of the reader, or reading, itself. It is only in this instance (this 
\textit{Nu}) of his sympathetic, identificatory participation—in the 
coincidence of his need, his \textit{Glück}—that the conjunction of the 
different levels of language can manifest their sudden, fleeting simi-
larity, not just to each other but to him and his moment, triggering 
the mimetic blending of all three. It is, Benjamin says, out of such a 
conjunction, such a \textit{Zeitmoment}, that the ancient astrologer reads 
both fate and future out of the patterns constellated by stars in the 
sky; and so too the modern reader his meanings out of the (swirl-
ing, tinkling) patterns of sound, shape, and sense from words on 
the page.

As the mention of both fate and the future makes clear, Benja-
min regards the double (or triple) reading of the astrologer as a 
mode of divination. And he just as explicitly regards all reading of 
the present-day adult as also a form of divination, of clairvoyance 
(\textit{Hellsicht}), a migration of reading as such out of stars, entrails, 
and coincidences in mankind’s distant past into a new reading (\textit{ein 
neues Lesen}), based upon the twin relocations of magical logic into 
the human unconscious, in both its individual and its social forms, 
and the materiality of language, in both its aural and its visual 
forms. Even if no longer directly based on the “body reading” of 
natural life, this new reading is still based on a mimetic chaining 
of the subject to the similar in what he reads. And whereas what 
the subject reader mimetically connects to may not directly be the 
world of things, it is still to language \textit{as} a world of things, perhaps 
the only world of things still regularly accessible to him. Benjamin 
underscores this by saying that the reader encounters in language 
things in their “essences, in their most delicate and transient sub-
stances,” and as the adjectives indicate, this “essence” of things 
is not only their isolated materiality but also their reciprocal rela-
tionality, their constellating sympathetic force as temporally con-
ditioned mimetic subjects and objects.\textsuperscript{192} For this reason, this new 
reading, too, is still very much a matter of movement, animation, 
and the coordination of different times, as the future thrust of each 
series of letters and words inflects and is inflected by its nonlinear, 
back-and-forth play of sound and image, at once binding and keep-
ing open their past, present, and future sense.
We see, then, that when Benjamin claims the cosmic mimetic force has migrated into language per se and clairvoyance into reading per se, he retains for it many of the key features of magic divination we’ve found throughout. However, what we do not clearly see retained is perhaps the central component of divination, the one Benjamin himself foregrounds with respect to the ancient tradition but then seemingly does not return to when describing the new reading of modern man: the reading of fate, or rather, of fate and the future (and so, too, Glück). The point is a tricky one, but I’m going to suggest that Benjamin does indeed return to this aspect of reading, in fact devotes the concluding paragraph of “Doctrine of the Similar” to it: even that he has been working toward this end throughout.

To some extent, the question of fate has already been adumbrated in what was just said. Insofar as fate is a matter of our connection to things, it seems to have been both lost and recuperated in our present reading practices: lost insofar as the direct connection between the reader’s body or natural life and the world of things is imagined to have been severed or forgotten, recuperated insofar as reading retains, even enacts, our now largely unconscious connection to language as its own thing world. Both the connection and the disconnection with the world of fate qua things have, we know, both positive and negative aspects for Benjamin, particularly regarding the subject’s need for happiness; and we could sketch out arguments for reading as both the best occasion for happiness in both its connection and its disconnection with the world of fate, and an occasion in which happiness is no longer really possible or at stake—or only falsely at stake, a symptom of modern man’s isolated detachment from a broader world, or community, of meaning.

But the question of fate still left open (indeed, left open and residual since our closing section on Fontane) is whether Benjamin believes reading might actually, momentarily and fleetingly, overcome our disconnection with a world beyond language, restore for his modern man the actual magical, natural connection to things themselves: to the broader world or community of meaning beyond our human selves. Benjamin appends to his claim that, in language,
the reader encounters things in their most delicate and transient substances, “even in their aromas,” hinting at an atavistic, physical level of perception that is even deeper than the human unconscious; and this peculiar, almost Proustian thought might suggest such a restored connection, much as those southern moonlit nights might resurrect the nascent promises that lay in constellations of the stars. But, as the examples of both Proustian smell and the resurrected magic moment also suggest, this is where the matter of fate in connection with things joins most forcibly to the matter of fate in connection with time—and as part of that, fate in its connection not only with the past but with futurity.

We’ve encountered the question of futurity in its relation to fate and divinatory reading in several different forms over the course of this chapter, beginning with the injunction against raising the question at all: the prohibition against inquiring into the future, or linking Glück to the future, that appears from the early “Fate and Character” to the closing sections of the late “On the Concept of History”; an occultation adumbrated in Fontane’s late realism and echoed repeatedly in Benjamin’s modernist peers. But in our reading of graphology we recovered something of the future in the open temporal line of handwriting, whose movement and future thrust proved essential to the divination of the “other” significance conveyed by its signs. With respect to gambling, we found the crucial factor of acceleration, which allowed for an outpacing of ordinary, conscious time and, again, a kind of future thrust that opened up the gambler qua reader to telepathic contact with the world of (moving) things—the ball—and so, too, to a momentary divination, the happy recognition of what was to come, inflecting the present. And in childhood, or rather, in the memory of childhood, we found how the movement of the reader himself, out of childhood (and its still existent mimetic chains) and into adulthood (where those earlier chains have broken), produced the conditions to divine in childhood another hidden significance, another similarity—the divination of a fate and a future that pertained not only to the child’s past life and activity, but to those of the present-day adult as well. We’ve also just seen how, in the “new reading” of the present essay, time, movement, and the future play a key role in the divination of the
“other” significance conveyed by the sequestered sound and image play of all language.

All of these figure in a reading of the last paragraph of “Doctrine of the Similar,” which is devoted to the matter of tempo or speed in reading, the speed that Benjamin says is inseparable from clairvoyant reading and our ability to participate in that measure of time “in which similarities flash fleetingly out of the stream of things (dem Fluß der Dinge),” and which the reader “must not forget at any cost, lest he go away empty-handed.” The language recalls the earlier discussion of the tempo or pace that was a key component of the divination explored in handwriting and gambling; and it echoes as well the earlier discussion of the peculiar temporal dimension to the realm of the similar and the indispensable introduction of the third term, the astrologer qua reader, whose own moving moment, like that of the diary reader or historian (qua back-turned prophet), proved essential to realizing the coordinated Nu that revealed fate and future. To this we might add as well one of the leading motifs of Benjamin’s writings on hashish, namely, the “heightened velocity of thought” that enables a “quickened empathy with all things,” a “tenderness toward all things,” connected to the apprehension of an aura that emanates out of them—an experience reproduced, apparently without drugs, in a short passage contemporary with the “Doctrine,” entitled “The Tree and Language” (Der Baum und die Sprache). Here Benjamin describes himself climbing a hill, coming under a tree, and

following its movements with my eyes, I suddenly found that, within me, language was so gripped by it that momentarily the age-old marriage with the tree was suddenly reenacted once again in my presence. . . . A gentle breeze signaled the start of a wedding and soon carried throughout the world the children who had quickly sprung from this bed, like an image-speech (Bilder-rede).

Während ich ins Laubwerk sah und seiner Bewegung folgte, mit einmal [wurde] in mir die Sprache dergestalt von ihm ergriffen, daß sie augenblicklich die uralte Vermählung mit dem Baum in meinem Beisein noch einmal vollzog. . . . Ein leiser Wind spielte zur Hochzeit auf und trug alsbald die schnell entsprossenen Kinder dieses Betts als Bilderrede unter alle Welt.
That is, with this movement, a moment of well-nigh mystical melding is achieved in which language is “once again” joined to things, and the self to both, and in which the “age-old” past, the present, and a “quickly” generated future all seem equally and simultaneously there.  

Something very similar seems to be at stake in Benjamin’s musings about the speed required for the magic clairvoyance of reading itself, including its production of that rare but blissful, critical moment of magic divination. The rapid pace of reading allows one, even forces one, to outpace strictly rational cognition and its time, and to enter into a different perceptual temporality in which the similarities that sign themselves in moving things—and perhaps especially in the sounds and images, but also in the “aromas” of words as things—themselves magically, suddenly, and fleetingly appear. It is a temporality, a Zeitmoment of coordinated lines of movement that Benjamin explicitly suggests achieves a contact with things—of the semiotics of the text with the mimetic thingness of its language and of the mimetic, sympathetic reader with both, but also, it seems, of both language and the reader with the mimetic thingness of the world itself (der Fluß der Dinge). And it is a moment, too, in however rich or weak a form, filled with its own futurity, if only we grasp it; a moment of contact with words, both meaning and material, that came before, imbuing them with a future, another meaning, and so too a fate; but a moment, too, in necessary contact with its own future, a future that will show the present its own meaning, its own fate, which the rapidity of reading can make always already present. Realizing this moment, which can happen whenever we read, can bring a special kind of happiness, of Glück and “tenderness,” that rare moment of “bodily presence of mind” he calls divination.