

# On the Heightened Intuitability of History in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*

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**ABSTRACT:** Walter Benjamin's use of the concepts of collection and archive to characterize the task of the historian could initially be viewed as an antidote to the danger presented by the philosophical concept of system, which is liable to be abused in attempts to represent the essential in history. "Collection" and "archive" indeed introduce contingency and concrete materiality in all its details that resist easy assimilation into various premature conceptual unities. And yet it might be as problematic, in attempting to characterize Benjamin's historical materialism, to give up on the dimension of overall unity that is the task of the project, in favor of the detailed dispersal of the collection and the archive. The overall unity is primarily one that is characterized by Benjamin as that of an image, the dialectical image. The present essay is devoted to clarifying the relation of the collection of material to that of the higher intuitability of history provided in the dialectical image. In particular, I aim to develop the concept of image in view of the relation that Benjamin establishes between his own method and conception of truth and that of Goethe. There would thus be an intimate connection between the notion of image as Benjamin understands it and that of archetype central to Goethe's reliance on intuition in the scientific investigation of nature.

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## 1. INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

The concepts of collection and archive figure prominently in attempts to describe the character of Benjamin's writings.<sup>1</sup> In particular, they are often found useful to characterize the incomplete *Arcades Project*. Indeed, we lack anything remotely like a unified and complete text and have only a collection of materials, mostly drawn from books and documents and arranged into "convolutes" by way of certain very general characterizations: convolute A, for instance, is titled "Arcades, *Magasin de Nouveautés*, Sales Clerks"; convolute B, "Fashion"; convolute C, "Ancient Paris, Catacombs, Demolitions, Decline of Paris"; and so on, thirty-six convolutes in all.

But it is not only because of the incomplete character of the project that one is justified in relating the notions of collection and archive to Benjamin's endeavor. Rather these notions play a role in Benjamin's own understanding of the task he set himself: that is, they helped him to articulate aspects of his construction of what has the highest actuality in history. One of the convolutes of the project, convolute H, is even entitled "The Collector." And Benjamin's essay "Eduard Fuchs, Historian and Collector" contains many themes that are essential for understanding the method of the *Arcades Project* and that suggest the close connection between the notion of collecting and Benjamin's conception of history.

One might initially conceive of the use of the terms "collection" and "archive" in understanding the historian's task as serving as an antidote to the danger presented by the philosophical concept of system, which is liable to be abused in attempts to represent the essential in history. "Collection" and "archive" indeed introduce contingency and concrete materiality in all its details that resist easy assimilation into various premature conceptual unities. And yet it might be as problematic, in attempting to characterize Benjamin's historical materialism, to give up on the dimension of overall unity that is the task of the project, in favor of the dispersal and concreteness of the collection and the archive.

It is thus necessary to bring together in the proper way the aspect of collection and that of an overall unity. The latter is primarily a unity that is characterized by Benjamin as that of an image, the dialectical image. The present essay is devoted to clarifying the relation of the collection of material to the higher intuitability of history provided in the dialectical image.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Page references for Benjamin's writings will be given immediately after the quotation, using the following abbreviations:

A *The Arcades Project*. Translated by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

C *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

O *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by J. Osborne. London: NLB, 1977.

SW *Selected Writings of Walter Benjamin*. Edited by Marcus Bullock, Howard Eiland, and Michael Jennings. 4 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003.

<sup>2</sup> The editor of the German edition, Rolf Tiedemann, has suggested that with the help of two brief exposés of the project that Benjamin composed in 1935 and 1939, for the Institute for Social Research, we can envision what would have been the completed state of the collection of materials: "The fragments of the *Passagen-werk* can be compared to the materials used in building a house, the outline of which has just been marked in the ground or whose foundations are just being dug. In the two exposés . . . Benjamin sketches the broad outline of the plan as he envisaged it in 1935 and 1939. The five or six sections of each expose should have corresponded to the same number of chapters in the book, or to continue the analogy, to the five or six floors of the projected house. Next to the foundations we find neatly piled excerpts, which would be used to construct the walls; Benjamin's own thoughts would have provided the mortar to hold the building together. The reader now possesses many of these theoretical and interpretive reflections, yet in the end they almost seem to vanish beneath the very weight of the excerpts" ("Dialectics at a Standstill," in A, 931).

## 2. A THEORY OF CITATION

As its name makes clear, the immediate subject matter of the *Arcades Project* is the Paris arcades, mercantile galleries constructed in the first half of the nineteenth century by covering certain streets, mostly in the area between the Palais Royal and the Opéra, with a roof of iron and glass. The material for the book is drawn from various sources on Paris of the time: from records of responses to this architectural phenomenon and from accounts that bear a more oblique relation to the arcades (such as the World Exhibitions or the poetry and life of Charles Baudelaire). Most of the material found in the convolutes is quoted from texts of the period, but some is from later texts on nineteenth-century Paris.

One should thus note first what might almost be too obvious to mention: namely, the written character of the material with which Benjamin worked. Indeed, the contrast between the written and the experience of illumination one might have in strolling through the passages is crucial in understanding how Benjamin conceived of the realization of the potential of the outdated material that the Surrealists relished because of its dreamlike character. Thus, we start from the understanding that the collection of materials that Benjamin deploys is first and foremost a collection of *quotations*.

Benjamin clearly separates those quotations from his appended *comments*. It is as if he deploys a very strict discipline to *leave* the material he has gathered in the form of quotations. It appears as though a special effort was made *not* to produce larger unities of writing that would rework and absorb the initial material. It is noteworthy that although Benjamin worked for more than ten years on the project, the convolutes *still* consist only of quotations. The only exception is convolute J on Baudelaire, part of which was turned into continuous prose form and ultimately reduced to the famous essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.”<sup>3</sup> The character of the prose of this essay and its relation to the collection of quotations need to be considered in more detail than is possible here. One would have to assess how the move from quotations to continuous text was assisted by a complex system of color signs, whose function was, it would seem, in part to assist

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<sup>3</sup> The work on convolute J was to eventuate in a book on Baudelaire, whose provisional title was “Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism.” Thus, Benjamin wrote to Max Horkheimer on April 16, 1938, that in his planned Baudelaire book “the most important motifs of the *Arcades* project converge.” He also spoke of its tendency to “develop into a miniature of the *Arcades*” (C, 556). On July 8, 1938, we find Benjamin writing to Scholem: “The subject matter [of the Baudelaire book] necessarily puts into motion the entire mass of thoughts and studies I have launched myself into over the last years. In this sense, I can say that a very precise model of the *Arcades project* would be furnished if the ‘Baudelaire’ were to succeed” (C, 567). And in his letter to Horkheimer of September 28, 1938, Benjamin characterized very clearly this model quality of the Baudelaire book: “As you know, the Baudelaire was originally conceived as a chapter of the *Arcades*, specifically as the penultimate chapter. . . . I came to realize. . . that a Baudelaire essay more modest in length that did not repudiate its responsibility to the *Arcades* draft could be produced only as part of a Baudelaire *book*. . . . This book is meant to set down the decisive philosophical elements of the *Arcades* project in what I hope will be definitive form” (C, 573).

The book on Baudelaire was never completed, but we have the second part of the three planned parts (respectively entitled “Baudelaire as Allegorist,” “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” and “The Commodity as Poetic Object”). We have various indications from Benjamin of how further material was to be ordered for the remaining two parts (e.g., the material called “Central Park” gathered for the third part). Moreover, there is the famous essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” which though in part an extreme condensation of the themes that appear in “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” also includes motifs belonging to the other, unfinished parts.

The most complete edition of the available material that served Benjamin in planning the Baudelaire book was recently published as *Charles Baudelaire: Un poeta lirico nell'età del capitalismo avanzato*, ed. Giorgio Agamben, B. Chitussi, and Clemens Karl Haerle (Milan: Neri Pozza, 2012).

in constructing the text directly from the quotations—that is, as much as possible without intermediary stages. Benjamin had used this method of construction from quotations before; indeed, it was deployed in writing his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which he described to Gershom Scholem as “the craziest mosaic technique you can imagine” (C, 256). Thus, one could say that the text that emerges is not so much an elaboration and interpretation of the quoted material as an ordering of that material as a continuity of citations without quotation marks.

The claim that the text of the *Arcades Project* was to be constructed from quotations should become more convincing if we describe precisely the methodical use of quotation and further clarify its function. A citation is a bit of language taken out of context. Context includes what might be relevant to assess the intention that governed the original utterance (when quoted, politicians tirelessly complain that their words have been taken out of context). Thus, in quotation certain aspects of the meaning that might not have been the focus or the point of the original utterance may surface as what is valuable in it. This further means that quoting has a disruptive effect on the customary ways of assessing value and separating the important from the negligible. One could even say that at the limit, if what is found meaningful about the quotation bears no relation to *why* the words were uttered or written in the first place, a general effect of leveling is produced by this method—as though, there is no distinction between major and minor matters insofar as the material of history is concerned.

This dissociation from context is not to be overcome by introducing the author’s own organizing outlook. As part of the ascetic discipline that Benjamin adopted, he allowed himself only to order the quotations and add certain specific *comments* and forbore from taking an interpretive standpoint that would integrate the fragments. Saying that, we enter into dangerous territory, for one might be tempted to think of Benjamin’s writing as taking the form of a rhapsodic meandering through a myriad of details that come to the fore with the charm and strangeness of outdated objects in a curiosity shop. This is why it is necessary to insist that the task of writing that Benjamin set himself is continuous with that of a major metaphysician such as Hegel. Benjamin had the highest unity of spirit in mind. The question is why he thought this needed to be achieved by constructing the text using indirect discourse or quotations concerning some glass-roofed streets in nineteenth-century Paris.

### 3. COMMENTARY AND CRITIQUE

Let me add a further worry regarding Benjamin’s method, recalling that much of the collected material expresses *problematic* conditions of existence in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. The mercantile galleries that are the arcades of Paris are products of a bourgeois society. Taking into account the Marxist undercurrents of Benjamin’s thought, one would expect his work on these phenomena to have a *critical* edge. Yet, merely collecting and ordering quotations, even with some added comments, seems to leave the author with no tools to *criticize* that material. Moreover, how would such a gathering of material avoid being an *endless* task? I don’t mean the question to be psychological (i.e., concerned with Benjamin’s reluctance to complete the work) or even only epistemological (i.e., concerned with the idea as regulative); rather, I refer to the political.

This is indeed one of the points that Adorno raises in a letter complaining of what seemed to him to be Benjamin’s peculiar brand of materialism, one that would make his “questions invisible to all but initiates” (SW, 4:101). Only theory would constitute, according to Adorno, a critical standpoint that would yield a decisive judgment on the mass of material. The immersion in the

remains of the times is in danger of being, at best, positivistic history or, worse, of itself falling prey to the spell of the material.

Certainly, Benjamin sought “the destructive or critical momentum of materialist historiography” (A, 475). But we might not understand properly the nature of critique if we do not start from his own characterization of the work as commentary: “To grasp the construction of history as such. In the structure of commentary.” On the face of it, commentary is the polar opposite of criticism. Commentary takes its object to be uncriticizable. It starts from the presupposition of its absolute positive value. It is for this reason that it is a form that one finds particularly suited to classical works and scriptures. This is not an implication that Benjamin shies away from. Indeed, he writes in convolute N: “Bear in mind that commentary on a reality (for it is a question here of commentary, of interpretation in detail) calls for a method completely different from that required by commentary on a text. In the one case, the scientific mainstay [*Grundwissenschaft*] is theology; in the other case, philology” (A, 460).<sup>4</sup>

The archaic form of the commentary would then be deployed in the *Arcades Project* in the same way that it was used in theology—that is, to relate to the highest, uncriticizable reality. This was not the first time that Benjamin modeled his writing on a schema belonging to theology. The earlier *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which Benjamin referred to as a “mosaic of quotations,” took the form of a medieval treatise, which similarly cultivates an esoteric style, that is, an essentially indirect relationship to its ultimate object: “[The] exercise [of philosophy], which has imposed itself upon all those epochs which have recognized that the essentiality of truth is uncircumscribable in the form of a propaedeutic, can be designated by the scholastic term treatise because this term refers, albeit implicitly, to those objects of theology without which truth is inconceivable” (O, 28, translation modified).

There are weighty theological justifications for not wanting or not being able to speak directly about God. True to that understanding, the theological treatise refrained from all intentional elements that purportedly aim at the highest and strove for an indirect relation to it (or the detour). And if this is indeed the model that Benjamin adopted, one could see a justification for working

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<sup>4</sup> Here it is important to consider the relation between critique and commentary elaborated in the opening lines of Benjamin’s essay “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*.” While critique is after truth content, philology engages material content. Yet the more significant a work of art is, the more are the two completely intertwined and interpenetrating. As Benjamin emphasized, it is only with time that a transformation is recognizable in the great work. Certainly, it is not a transformation in its truth content, which is assumed to be immutable, but rather the transformation is in the character of its material content. The more the work detaches itself from the life in which it was formed, the more the realities that belong to its contingent content stand out in their peculiarity. What remains inconspicuous as long as we take in the work, or experience it in its lifeworld, emerges as strange or striking and therefore as material that provides the occasion for philology or commentary to engage with the work. But such philology is not to be taken as merely historicizing, or repositioning the work in its living element, through a scholarly knowledge of that world in which the work was made. Philological knowledge is strictly speaking the meticulous attentiveness to the transformations of the contingent in the work.

Such a philological dimension, to which Benjamin refers as commentary, is then to be contrasted to the lived experience of the beauty of a work. It is characterized as a knowledge that works against the luster of the lived experience of the encounter with art. To the extent that the radiance of the work is still perceptible through that layer of philological commentary which extinguishes the immediate beauty and attractiveness of the work, we have a criterion to recognize it as pertaining to the truth content that was originally indistinguishable from the material content. Thus, critique, properly understood, is inescapably wedded to commentary. Philology is, at one and the same time, the eradication of the immediacy of the beautiful appearance, as well as what prepares the material for the presentation of truth content. “The truth content emerges,” as Benjamin puts it, “as that of the material content” (SW, 1:300).

solely with indirect discourse, with quotation. But instead of resolving the issue, this only multiplies the questions. What is the highest reality that the work would make recognizable? For the modern reality that is its expressed subject matter is far from ideal. To adopt the mode of commentary would imply that there is a way of presenting that past as partaking in a higher reality. Yet how is the relation to such a higher reality to be construed, and what would it be for the past to partake in it?

#### 4. CONSTRUCTION AND INTUITION

How are we to conceive, then, of the kind of unity that consists of construction out of quotations? Much has been made of Benjamin's reference to the art of montage to characterize his mode of work, but I want to suggest another, maybe more useful, context to clarify his constructivism. Insisting on construction with quotations meant for Benjamin, first of all, retaining a material *concreteness* in the presentation. It avoided the prevalent ways of opening a gap between the particular details of historical phenomena and their systematic articulation as knowledge, the latter often identified with an abstract theory of phenomena. Benjamin stood by his "refusal to renounce anything that would demonstrate the materialist presentation of history as imagistic [*Bildhaft*] in a higher sense than the traditional presentation" (A, 463). And he similarly asked himself, regarding the method of historical materialism, "In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened intuitability [of history] to the realization of the Marxist method?" (A, 463).

The expression "heightened intuitability" suggests aligning Benjamin's project with Goethe's scientific method, to which Benjamin referred on numerous occasions. In convolute N Benjamin related his work explicitly to Goethe's understanding of truth, saying that he sought that "form of the historical object which satisfies Goethe's requirement for the object of analysis: to exhibit a genuine synthesis. It is the primal phenomenon of history" (A, 474). The primal phenomenon is the synthesis of the phenomenal that proceeds by the arrangement and ordering of individual phenomena. Goethe aimed to make present the unity of an origin, or to present an idea in phenomena over and above the multiplicity of facts, yet without resorting to abstraction and general laws.

In Goethe's "delicate empiricism" the articulated ordering of phenomenal material bears the weight of theory. "This 'empiricism,'" Benjamin writes in another context, "grasps what is essential in the object itself; therefore, Goethe says: 'The highest thing would be to understand that everything factual is already theory. The blue of the sky reveals to us the fundamental laws of chromatics. One must not look for anything behind the phenomena; they are themselves the doctrine'" (SW, 1:192). Thus, Goethe's experiments did not function as the confirmation of a theoretical hypothesis. Rather, Goethe understood experiments as providing experiential intermediary links in the ordering of phenomena, forming an experiential continuity that makes manifest how phenomena belong together. That continuity or integration saves the phenomena by having them take part in the presentation of the higher unity that Goethe calls the *Ur-phänomen*.

It is against this very brief description of Goethe's method that we must understand Benjamin's claim that he pursued "the origin of the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline.... Seen from the standpoint of causality however,... these facts would not be primal phenomena, they become such only insofar as in their... 'unfolding'... they give rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants" (A, 462). It is this unfolding that must be presented in the construction of an order out of quotations. Such understanding is not achieved in theory but rather demands to be shown in the perspicuous construction of the text.

## 5. CONSTRUCTION: ARTIFICIAL OR NATURAL?

Benjamin thus presented his undertaking as a transposition of Goethe's concept of the *Ur-phänomen* "extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history" (A, 462). This claim can be read to mean that whereas Goethe sought to investigate natural phenomena, Benjamin used the same method to investigate historical phenomena. This is not so much wrong as incomplete. For Goethe's method develops essentially in relation to the nature of its object: it is the method that is adequate to showing the *creative* life of nature. So, if Benjamin adopted the Goethean method, it would also be correct to say that he sought something of the manifestation of a life in historical phenomena (or sought to present human history as a form of *natural history*).

Goethe, one should say, was a central figure for many of Benjamin's contemporaries who similarly tried to adopt his scientific method for the consideration of cultural and historical phenomena (Spengler, Simmel, and Cassirer can be mentioned in this context). One of the dangers Benjamin recognized in the appropriation of the concept of "life" for history was in understanding the task of the historian to be that of revealing the unique and incomparable form of life of the past. Goethe's empiricism and his commitment to the concrete would serve to justify a historicist methodology, "the substitution of a process individualizing observation for a generalizing view of human forces in history."<sup>5</sup>

In order to counter this kind of adoption of Goethean method, it is therefore necessary to emphasize the radically constructive nature of his work. The highest manifestation of the natural, the higher life of nature, is recognized only by way of the construction of an order out of individual phenomena. The life of nature does not appear naturally in the phenomenal world of itself. It is recognized in its ideal realization, in the primal phenomenon constructed. Similarly, we want to understand the construction out of historical material (the quotation) to be a presentation of a higher life or "true synthesis." And as Benjamin emphasizes, the order of causality or temporal succession does not determine the order in which the primal phenomenon is presented. The method constitutes "a break with vulgar historical naturalism" (A, 461). This is not the rejection of naturalism but rather the call for a higher form of it, attentive to the realization of the past.

## 6. A REALIZATION OF THE PAST

Let me approach the difficult notion of realization by turning once again to the work with quotations. We should distinguish two ways in which quotation can function as material in a construction. In the first, call it the archeological mode, it is used as material for a reconstruction of the form of life of the past. In the second, call it the ideal mode, quotations are viewed, to use a phrase of the early Romantics, as "fragments of the future." The material is not used to provide a picture of nineteenth-century experience (as was depicted, say, by Benjamin's contemporary Siegfried Kracauer, in his *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time*). That is, the unity aimed at is not something that can be identified with the space of facts or the unity of experience of the time. In being so dissociated, the citations become material to form a wholly different constructed unity that is essentially distinct from the reconstruction of the past.

This points to the critical dimension in Benjamin's historiographical method, while making it wholly compatible with the model of commentary I discussed earlier. Insofar as the *Arcades*

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Meinecke, "Historicism: The Rise of the New Historical Outlook," in *German Essays on History*, ed. Rolf Sältzer (New York: Continuum, 1991), 196.

*Project* quotes, it wrests material out of its context, or it has a destructive relation to that unity of life of the initial historical context. Insofar as we consider that material in a construction, in view of its realization, we redeem it, so to speak, by having it partake in the presentation of the highest reality, the archetype or the ideal on which the text is to be a commentary.

One is to conceive of the construction of history as a form of *realization* of the past. That is, in writing history, one is attentive to the sense that the past, as it happened to have happened, has not yet achieved the highest actuality. Providing historical knowledge with the task of realizing its object—that is, the past—must be understood in the strictest possible sense as raising that past to a higher degree of reality than it previously had. In other words, this is to be understood *ontologically* or substantively rather than merely epistemologically, as achieving better knowledge or a more complete understanding of the past. Even though it is not possible for me to explore the complexities of this idea of realization here, let me nevertheless say a few words that address the mode of unity that answers to this idea of realization.

For Benjamin, actualization was internally related to achieving a higher articulation of *meaning*. Or, to put it differently, a higher realization is a matter of fulfillment in *significance*. Needless to say, such meaning is not to be conceived of as “merely linguistic” but rather, true to Benjamin’s understanding of language, it is to be conceived of as the meaning of and in things. In other words, the fact that Benjamin worked with quotations should not be taken to imply that he was interested merely in the views and opinions on the arcades of Paris. Through the work on language he was realizing the meaning of that reality, thus realizing that reality itself. Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator” is something of a model for the realization of meaning in history.<sup>6</sup> The higher degree of reality can also be understood as a fuller *integration* of reality in meaning, relating or tying everything together. Describing his dialectical method he writes that “one could speak of the increasing concentration (integration) of reality, such that everything past (in its time) can acquire a higher grade of actuality than it has in the moment of its existing. How it marks itself as higher actuality is determined by the image as which and in which it is comprehended” (A, 392). That image, I have suggested in bringing together Benjamin’s conception of truth with Goethe’s, can be called an archetype. Though a construction is required to recognize and realize it in the present, it is not a representation but rather the original phenomenon of

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<sup>6</sup> The relation to the essay “The Task of the Translator” is evident if one develops not just the idea of life revealed through historical construction but also, since it is the life of the past to be realized in the construction, an afterlife of the past: “Historical ‘understanding’ is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the ‘afterlife of works’ in the analysis of ‘fame’ is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general” (A, 460). An elaboration of the notion of afterlife in meaning is crucial for recognizing the internal connection between life and history: “The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life. In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined from the standpoint of history rather than that of nature” (SW, 1:255). This is not to say that Benjamin had an organicist understanding of history but rather that he brought together the highest actualization of life in meaning and what it is for something to have history.

Pursuing the contrast between organic growth and development and a conception of historical life that includes what Benjamin called afterlife has far-reaching consequences. Indeed, it not only expresses Benjamin’s rejection of the idea that the realization of the highest life can take the form of an ordered community (the state) modeled upon a kingdom of nature but also expresses his opposition to schemes of history that conceive of it in regulative terms, as an infinite task of approach toward an ideal. Through the consideration of the notion of an afterlife of meaning, Benjamin was attempting to counter the conception of an infinite task of humanity that underlies various conceptions of universal history. Indeed, the very idea of realization as a moment of recognition in the afterlife of the past gives the present an essential role in relation to the fulfillment of the past.



history itself. Further, I should add that integration is not an extensive but an intensive notion. We think, not merely of *covering* more and more different phenomena that belong to a certain passing historical time, but rather of concentration, bringing out how things internally belong to one another and thereby fully realizing that archetype in the present.

An intensive integration of reality thus has something of a centrifugal momentum and draws one to focus on a very narrow range of phenomena and bring out through their relationships a substantial unity. This explains the focal point of the arcades in the project. Yet the focus on such a specific phenomenon as the arcades does not serve to exclude other matters; rather, strangely enough, it presents more truthfully broad expanses in space and in time. To use a phrase of Benjamin's, we can have in and through the focus on the arcades an image of the capital of the nineteenth century, meaning a refraction of Paris and through it of the times, that is, of our modernity. Yet even this does not suggest sufficiently the concentration of meaning that Benjamin sought in the intensification of the relatedness of the material. For we could further say that he set himself no less than the task to present in and through this highly concrete and specific material a dramatic abbreviation of history that competes with the representations of the unity of spirit that metaphysics in its most developed forms sought (call it an abbreviation of the world of ideas). It is as though the *Arcades Project* was meant as a philosophical miniature, in which all the significant dimensions of human existence come to be integrated and abbreviated in the individual details of the phenomenon in question. The quotation that opens convolute A, from a tourist guidebook of the period, is in that respect significant: "In speaking of the inner boulevards we have made mention again and again of the arcades which open onto them. These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature in which customers will find everything they need" (A, 31). A slightly more philosophical way of putting this idea of a world in miniature would be to invoke here Benjamin's understanding that a presentation of history must be monadic: "the real world," Benjamin writes, "could well constitute a task, in the sense that it would be a question of penetrating so deeply into everything real as to reveal thereby an objective interpretation of the world" (O, 47-48).

## 7. A UNITY OF SEMBLANCE

But isn't the question whether there is *in fact* such a connection between the details of the arcades of Paris that come to the fore in the quotations and what is refracted through them, in constructing the textual unity of the *Arcades Project*? Wouldn't this utter intensification of the connectedness of the material, as well as the reach of its meaning, end up being not a higher naturalism but a form of Surrealism? Wouldn't such an attempt to charge the arcades with meaning and make them reflect a totality of meaning be something of an illusion? In a sense, Benjamin would not deny it. But it is, if one may say so, a *real* illusion. The material, being drawn together, acquires the quality of semblance, or expresses all the more the dreamlike aspect of the past. Images of utopia, dreams of happiness, and the hopes of another existence are hidden in what the past has left behind and then come to life in the construction of Benjamin's text. Indeed, what needs to be recognized is the presence of utopia "in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions" (A, 5). The issue for Benjamin is not how to separate the truth of the matter

from these dreams but rather how to understand what manner of truth can emerge from these dreams. To put it in the terms I used earlier, how can those dreams be realized? What would it be to translate the potential meaning of the dream into truth? What would it be to conceive of truth as awakening from the dream that is the past?

The significance of the material of the past can only crystallize in that medium of semblance. Apart from it, all such details would be utterly inconspicuous. Such semblance is not what hides the essential but rather that medium wherein the essential can be realized. This is not a simple structure to clarify philosophically. It goes back to Benjamin's inheritance of Platonic philosophy and in particular his concern with the relation between beauty and truth.<sup>7</sup> What is essential for the present purpose is to understand that the veiled—Benjamin also says, distorted—form in which fulfillment appears for a certain generation is not a mere fantasy of fulfillment but rather a fantasy that allows fulfillment (though not by accepting the appearance it takes in the dream). To reveal in the material the character of a dream configuration is again a task of writing.<sup>8</sup>

## 8. THE CONVERGENCE ON THE PRESENT

I mentioned that the *Arcades Project* is not the first instance in which Benjamin attempted this method of construction out of quotation and thought of its outcome in terms of a higher kind of intuitability. As already noted, he described *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, a work consisting almost entirely of quotations, as “the craziest mosaic technique you can imagine” (C, 256). The mosaic is a figure for the meticulous process of construction as well as for the pictorial character of the end point. The construction with the colored stones ultimately presents a whole that Benjamin suggestively called the holy image. The unity of the terminal state is that of an image (that which can be grasped in a perspicuous overview). The construction out of quotations comes together in an image, a constellation, or to put it in Benjamin's later terms “a dialectical image.”

For Benjamin the idea of the final state, of the emergence of a dialectical image, was closely related to the concept of recognition: “The authentic—the hallmark of origin in phenomena—is the object of discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition” (O, 45). Characterizing the end point as an image is not just making a claim about a certain form of arrangement of contents that would differ from, say, their arrangement as narrative. An image is that in which the highest reality is recognized.

In considering historical change externally, contemplating it from outside, we would be at a loss to characterize a point in which such an image emerges. It is not as though two separate and independently identifiable periods of the continuum of history are to be related by some objective process that *takes time*. Realization does not “work by itself,” as would be the case in some versions of scientific Marxism or Hegelianism. The only point that has, so to speak, privilege in relation to the investigated past is the present which investigates, that moment in which history comes to be known. Yet the historian of the present doesn't just happen to find himself at the

<sup>7</sup> The relation at issue can be epitomized by a phrase Benjamin introduced in the “Epistemo-critical Preface” of *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*: “can Truth do Justice to Beauty?” (O, 31).

<sup>8</sup> In the context of the individual life, the model for conceiving of a task of remembering the past as one which transforms the most ordinary events in the medium of memory into a dream weave is given by Proust's writing. See Benjamin's essay “On the Image of Proust,” in particular as he quotes Unold on Proust: “Proust managed to make the idle story interesting. He says: ‘Imagine, dear reader: yesterday I was dunking a bit of cake in my tea when it occurred to me that as a child I had spent some time in the country.’ For this he takes eighty pages, and it is so fascinating that you think you are no longer the listener but the daydreamer himself” (SW 2:239).

point in which realization is afforded. The present can be a moment of recognition by making the past *its own*. Recognition or acknowledgment, one might say, involves essentially a first-person standpoint. It is only thus that we can speak of a *Now* of recognizability.

The present as a turning point characterized by making history *ours* is precisely what allows speaking of the uniqueness of the past. (Think of it for a moment in analogy with the uniqueness of one's individual life. It is not to be identified merely by the events that occurred in it or by tracing a certain trajectory through time and space that differs from other such trajectories. The uniqueness of one's life is that it is mine. But that in turn means that a decisive appropriation or acknowledgment of the past as mine can realize it.) Turning the present into a "Now of Recognizability" is making present humanity responsible by having the past recognized as *its own* past. "The facts become something that just now first happened to us, first struck us" (A, 389). That we can speak of the past happening to us means that we can see ourselves as sharing a life with the past. That this emerges as striking means that the dialectical image precipitates and transforms this weight, which has become our past, into a decisive stance in relation to our present. It is here that one should begin the investigation of the concept of political action that is true to the higher intuitability of history that Benjamin sought in the *Arcades Project*. A