Reading Walter Benjamin
Writing through the catastrophe

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CONTENTS

Glossary of selected German words and expressions  page vii

Acknowledgements  ix

1 Introduction  1

2 Kultur pessimismus and the new thinking  9

3 Metaphysics of youth: Wyneken and ‘Rausch’  25

4 History: surreal Messianism  51

5 Goethe and the Georgkreis  75

6 Kant’s experience  101

7 Casting the work of art  124

8 Disrupting textual order  152

9 Conclusion: exile and the time of crisis  179

Bibliography  196

Index  207
Disrupting textual order

Shuffle, or order and de-formation

A reading of Benjamin always runs the risk of imposing unity where there is disunity, solidity and uniformity where there is a heap of broken images, and order where there are myriad warnings of disorder and ongoing catastrophe. Questions of narrative order and processes of de-formation ('Entstaltung') are central concerns of the modernist aesthetics that Benjamin had long explored to produce not only an unsettling critical practice, comparable to the practices of an entire range of twentieth-century experimental authors and artists, but also one which elucidates and implicates the role of the reader, consumer or collector of a text. The focus in this chapter is on B. S. Johnson's The Unfortunates and Benjamin's The Arcades Project, theorized as acts of 'Entstaltung' which both create a related 'principle of textual openness' or radially new approaches to a text's binding. Binding is a way of creating a repeatable experience, a memorialization of the text: it is also a childhood act that conjures modern technological processes and 'accomplishments' to 'the old worlds of symbol'. As Benjamin says in convolute N of The Arcades Project: 'There is nothing in the realm of nature that from the outset would be exempt from such a bond. Only, it takes form not in the aura of novelty but in the aura of the habitual. In memory, childhood, and dream.' Benjamin and Johnson worked on the book's binding until it let in more light: they created texts that function like shop windows, revealing the goods inside. The binding can be thought, via catachresis, as a theological concept (which may also bind Benjamin and Kierkegaard), or it is analogous to the Duchampian transparent 'bindings' or boxes: Duchamp's showcases 'with sliding glass panes'. Benjamin also thought of his boxed book as a strong-box, a safekeeping of materials, where transparency is achieved via 'concrete dialectical analysis' rather than being that of the display kiosk which now needs protecting from bombs. The shop window or the kiosk, in a time of emergency or crisis, may be too public, too open to catastrophic destruction, but the display case is usually put together for more intimate perusal, in either a museum or a private collection.

In 'Unpacking My Library', Benjamin argues that 'there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order.' Collectors and readers have different relationships with texts, readers more often than not unconsciously effacing the materiality of the text in favour of the content - the fictional, critical, philosophical narratives that the reader is 'drawn into'. In contrast, the collector is confronted with the materiality or physicality of the text, and the conditions of its collection (its provenance): a collectible book may have uncut, unreadable pages, and it becomes more valuable, not less so; a collectible book may be tracked down across many cities, many borders, many nation states - when it is finally acquired, it has gained layer upon layer of significance via experience and memory. There is a way in which collecting also neutralizes the materiality of the text, effacing its thingness, its being in the world, with almost as much force as the average content-reader. As Jean Baudrillard argues in The System of Objects, the collected object is abstracted from its function: 'objects in this sense have another aspect which is intimately bound up with the subject: no longer simply material bodies offering a certain resistance, they become mental precincts over which I hold sway, they become things of which I am the meaning, they become my property and my passion.' The object is not only abstracted, but transformed by infinite substitution: 'what is possessed is always an object abstracted from its function and thus brought into relationship with the subject. In this context all owned objects partake of the same abstractness.' The collector of rare books, special editions and so on may just as well be collecting smooth pieces of coloured glass from a beach: the relationship between subject and object is essentially the same. In the process of collecting, the materiality of the text can be, ironically, negated, just as use-value is superseded by exchange-value in another related process of abstraction; in other words, not only does the collected object have minimal, if not zero use-value, but its 'value' always derives from elsewhere. The issue here is one of the
materiality or *thingness* of the text *per se*: how do content readers or collectors account for the sheer *physicality* which B. S. Johnson’s boxbook *The Unfortunates* or Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* so powerfully foregrounds? As Henry Sussman argues: ‘If anything in the world of literature, of text, may be richly characterized as a *Thing*, it is surely Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*.’ Sussman continues:

Not a history, not a treatise; not even strictly speaking a sourcebook, for it also delivers Benjamin’s comments, not a work of criticism, in its utter disjointedness, not even, properly, a work. *The Arcades Project* may well be described as a *Thing* that confronts us in its arbitrariness, its Gehworfenheit, its Thrownness, its irreducible and irrefutable materiality. Its aggressive repudiation of any prior known or recognized genre qualifies it to be the literary counterpart of an exile.

Still we have a *thing-as-text*, which solicits us to explore the dimensionality of literary space and utilizes ‘literary montage’ to create competing narratives of nineteenth-century Paris.

B. S. Johnson was a British experimental writer who lived from 1933 to 1973; his work became effaced and forgotten and is now undergoing a process of recovery and recuperation, just as *The Arcades Project* is being manoeuvred centre-stage in Benjamin scholarship. Jonathan Coe writes that:*The Unfortunates* stands at the centre of Johnson’s output: it was the fourth of his seven novels. The first, *Travelling People*, was described by Anthony Burgess as ‘original in the way that *Tristram Shandy* and *Ulysses* are original’, and by the time of his sixth, *Christie Malry’s Own Double Entry*, he was picking up endorsements from Samuel Beckett... Johnson was, at the time, one of Britain’s best-known — if not best-selling — writers, famous for his uncompromising, bluntly expressed views on the conservatism of most modern fiction, and for the eye-catching devices which tended to characterize his books, such as holes cut in the pages and... unbound sections published together in a box.

In *The Unfortunates* there are twenty-seven sections, with the first and last sections marked as such; all the others can be shuffled into any order. It is a book that is both open and ordered, permutable yet structured, alive to the random playfulness of the reader yet still packaged, coffin-like. Why compare this text with Walter Benjamin’s? *The Arcades Project* can be seen as a large notebook, a preatory work or as a fabulous and insightful work of modernist montage. The translators note that ‘it has become customary to regard the text... as at best a “torso,” a monumental fragment or ruin, and at worst a mere notebook, which the author supposedly intended to mine for extended discursive applications... Certainly, the project as a whole is unfinished; Benjamin abandoned work on it in the spring of 1940... Did he leave behind anything more than a large-scale plan or prospectus?’ This perspective on *The Arcades Project* generates more questions than answers:

Why revise for a notebook? The fact that Benjamin also transferred masses of quotations from actual notebooks to the manuscript of the convolutes, and the elaborate organization of these cited materials in that manuscript... might likewise bespeak a compositional principle at work in the project, and not just an advanced stage of research. In fact, the montage form — with its philosophic play of distances, transitions and intersections, its perpetually shifting contexts and ironic juxtapositions — had become a favorite device in Benjamin’s later investigations... The work is complete, like the Lloyds Insurance building in the City of London: it reveals and revels in its exposed architectonics, and the hidden framework is transformed into a visible exoskeleton, creating new significations with the play of revealed incongruous material.

Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* and Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* problematize notions of textual order and affirm the playful nature of signification divided as such between content and form — as these components impact upon the reader; both texts also abandon the liberal humanist notion of the self-present controlling subject (the disruptive nature of subjectivity and textuality being prioritized over an originary, commanding point). Johnson operates critically on the interplay of text and memory, beginning *The Unfortunates* with ‘But I know this city!’ and ending with ‘the loss to me, to us’, with no full stop. In between, the ludic shuffling of memories recreates the problematic of ‘recreation’: a mimetic doubling which forces the reader to occupy the narrator’s ontological space. Benjamin ‘knows’ a city in a way that works via complex spacing (fragmentation and rearrangement) and temporality (reconfiguring the historical), the multi-perspectival experiences and interpretations of this place being reproduced via text: ‘the convolutes of *The Arcades Project* both
encompass and codify a certain history, and perform the demolition, in the progression toward fascism and anomic, of the utopianism that that history promised.” The architectural blueprint that Benjamin constructs does not deal as such with ‘orders’ of simulation, but rather with ‘registers’, where according to subtle differences in perspective or angle of vision, new worlds that were always already present come into sight. Benjamin’s architectural blueprint is reconstructed via each individual reading of The Arcades Project as with the re-shuffling or ordering of The Unfortunates. Benjamin notes that: To write history means giving dates their physiognomy – this allusion to Spengler’s Decline of the West also points towards Wittgenstein’s methodology in the Philosophical Investigations and the application of a conceptual configuration in the three-dimensional space of the engineering blueprint.

From the note on the inside box-cover of B. S. Johnson’s The Unfortunates:

This novel has twenty-seven sections, temporarily held together by a removable wrapper.

Apart from the first and last sections (which are marked as such) the other twenty-five sections are intended to be read in random order.

If readers prefer not to accept the random order in which they receive the novel, then they may re-arrange the sections into any other random order before reading.

The problem of order and its deformation is an essential one for The Unfortunates and The Arcades Project; the former is framed by first and last sections, stable points which rule out total permutational anarchy, whereas with The Arcades Project it is more a question of the macro- and micro-organization of the convolutes. In the act of placing side by side to create a new reading – shuffling the box-book, the montage effects of the convolutes – certain affinities are generated; in the history of modernism, the Surrealists prefigure this approach, but Benjamin was wary of too close an identification with any particular movement. In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin says:

An all too ostentatious proximity to the surrealist movement might become fatal to the project, as understandable and as well-founded as this proximity might be. In order to extricate it from this situation, I have had to expand the ideas of the project more and more. I have thus had to make it so universal within its most particular and minute framework that it will take possession of the inheritance of surrealism in purely temporal terms and, indeed, with all the authority of a philosophical Fortinbras.

The most directly inherited process is that of montage – the juxtaposing of quotations and commentary within The Arcades Project, in turn held together globally by bundles, ‘of manuscripts or printed materials that belong together’ (in the German meaning of the word Konvolut), exhibiting a certain arbitrariness, strangeness, even magical quality. As the translators say in the use of the English term: “Convolute” is strange, at least on first acquaintance, but so is Benjamin’s project and its principle of sectioning. The notion of too much order is as problematic as that of too little: the project is one of creating juxtapositions that exceed the pattern of their positioning, tearing new meaning from old. The convolutes, like Johnson’s shuffleable chapters, are in a state of permanent flux, although they can be bound in one set order (as with the unread text? The unopened box-book?). As Buck-Morss argues: “With the relentless tenacity of the collector . . . Benjamin refused to let go of any of his concerns that had the power to charge the material. Instead he superimposed them, with the result that the project’s fragments are bewilderingly overdetermined. Moreover, the conceptions double back on each other, so that chronological divisions in no way correspond to thematic ones.” The convolution of the project, the folding into bundles or chapters, moves at the moment of fission into a state of convulsion, both a contraction and a loss of control. In this state of convulsion, the order of the convolutes can simply be rejected, its programmatic status torn up (the plastic wrapper from a pack of cards is removed; the cards can be shuffled and they maintain their physical occupation of a certain amount of space, regard-
of order - the cards can explosively fan out, or burst into space in all directions as the entire pack is thrown into disarray. The actual process of moving from convulsions to convulsions is both internal to the structuring of The Unfortunates and The Arcades Project, and external, in that different temporality and spatiality are necessary possibilities of reading. Such inherent uncertainty or simultaneity thus maintains the undecided event or state of the marvellous: 'Advanced by Breton, the marvellous has two cognates: convulsive beauty and objective chance, the first announced in Nadja (1928), the second developed in Les Vases communicants (1932) and both refined in L'Amour fou (1937). [..] It is not clear whether it [the marvellous] is an external or internal event, of otherworldly, secular, or psychic agency.' Hal Foster suggests that there are two 'types' of the marvellous put forward by Aragon and Breton: Aragon was interested in the irritation of contradiction with the marvellous, whereas Breton ironed out contradiction as his marvellous functions to disorient and dislocate the subject. For Aragon the objectivity of the political slides into the subjectivity of the personal, but that does not mean that either position is uncontaminated by the other; Foster argues that the marvellous is in effect the uncanny, but 'projected, at least in part, away from the unconscious and repressed material toward the world and future revelation.' One of the main aims of The Arcades Project is to awaken the collective from their slumbers: at the same time, the dream-like state or trance of the flâneur has revolutionary potential. The seemingly contradictory status of such assertions may in part derive from the issue of the structuring of constellations, where the subjectivity of the reader's response (the 'shock') comes into contact with the objectivity of sequencing, positioning, cataloguing and so on. Foster indicates that there is some confusion in the Surrealist camp by asking: 'Is the marvellous a subjective experience? Is chance an objective event?' The psychology of the contamination, the shock of the constellations or marvellous, is in need of investigation:

first the marvellous as convulsive beauty will be seen as an uncanny confusion between animaté and inanimate states; then the marvellous as objective chance - as manifest in the sudden encounter and the found object - will be revealed as an uncanny reminder of the compulsion to repeat. Both these terms, convulsive beauty and objective chance, connote shock, which suggests that the marvellous also involves traumatic experience...
fashion by Gérard Genette, the latter asserting that the apparent chronological progression of *Remembrance of Things Past* is counter-balanced by the actual temporal disruptions and disjunctions, for example: ‘the narrator had the clearest of reasons for grouping together, in defiance of all chronology, events connected by spatial proximity, by climatic identity (the walks to Méségéise always take place in bad weather, those to Guermantes in good weather), or by thematic kinship’. Such anachronic groupings, in this example, are called by Genette ‘syllepses’, and are of special interest to him when it comes to the analysis of narrative frequency and *iterative* narrative (narrating one time, or at one time, what happened n times, or the ‘pseudo-mathematical formula’ 1N/nS). It could be argued that the earliest draft of *The Arcades Project* moves from sylleptic formulation based upon *iterative* narrative to *repeating* narrative (narrating n times what happened once, or nN/1S). In other words, the earliest draft ‘condenses’ iteration while the later drafts expand upon singular concepts or themes. But what of the convolutes themselves? These exist in an uneasy tension between the second variation of the singulative, and the repeating and sylleptic modes where the singulative equals narrating once what happened once (1N/1S) and narrating n times what happened n times (nN/nS), because, as Genette argues, ‘from the point of view...of relations of frequency between narrative and story, this anaphoric type is still in fact singulative and thus reduces to the previous type, since the repetitions of the narrative simply correspond...to the repetitions of the story. The singulative is therefore defined not by the number of occurrences on both sides but by the quality of this number’.

Is this relationship between narrative and story, derived from distributional analysis of Proust, transferable to *The Arcades Project*? Certainly Benjamin had long been blurring the boundaries between orthodox ways of ‘doing’ philosophy and other literary-critical approaches, and in part this is a function of his initial interest in early Romanticism, which in itself prefigures much structuralist and *post*-structuralist theory. Further, the overdetermined ‘Work of Art’ essay relies heavily not just on apperception, optics, technology and technique, but also on the importance of film *narrative* rather than the ‘Work of Art’ essay marking a break with Benjamin’s earlier theoretical theory of language, the essay can be regarded as creating a montage effect, whereby the theory of divine language or ‘signs’ is now placed side by side with the theory of the copy. Marcel Duchamp, in his box-book *À l'infini* the *Infinite*, theorizes: ‘a kind of writing, which no longer has an alphabet or words but signs (films) already emancipated from all the important grammatical rules from the “... baby talk...” of all ordinary languages.’ Crossing out his statement concerning the emancipation of this new language from all the important grammatical rules is also to place under erasure a serious ‘linguistic’ discourse, immediately replaced by the notion of rule-bound languages as ‘baby talk’; of interest here, however, is the formula ‘signs (films)’, which expresses the Benjaminian concept of language after the essays ‘On Language as Such’ and ‘The Work of Art’ are juxtaposed and interpenetrated. This formula can also be applied to the montage effects of *The Unfortunates*. One way of thinking through the commanding structuralist analysis of the story/plot binary opposition is to assign the exposés of *The Arcades Project* to abstracted stories and the convolutes to the actual narrative (that is to say, the narrative order in which they are actually placed). Of course this is complicated by the versioning that occurred throughout the different phases of the project. There is some point to utilizing this opposition in such a way: the desire for a ‘completed’ text can now be seen as leading to one more abstracted story as such. In other words, the relationships between the convolutes and the exposés may simply have been misunderstood, where more ‘refined’ versions of the exposés simply leave the convolutes untouched (and what of the sense, held by some, that the early drafts are somehow more effective than the later ones?). The Benjamin–Johnson–Proust constellation of ‘signs (films)’ thus reveals that temporal frequency is one of the keys to *The Arcades Project*, where there is a complex relationship between drafts and convolutes, and the pseudo-mathematical formulae 1N1S–nN/nS, nN/1S and 1N/nS. But how does Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* come into more detailed play in relation to this narratological analysis?

The problem of memory becomes, also, one of quotation; locating the past is highly problematic for Johnson’s narrator, overdetermined instances being countered by extreme uncertainty of time and location: did I come here before? Am I conflation several locations into one? When did I first visit this place? Did multiple events happen in this one place? Or am I condensing multiple events, at multiple locations, into a falsely unified location? Such overdetermination is transferred to the reader, for example: ‘all memories are curious, for that matter, the mind as a... think of an image' Two days I was ill...’. Where does this quotation, with its fascinating use of spacing, occur? It could be located, first, as page 5, in which case,
it is one of all the page 5s in all the shufflable chapters; more precisely, it could be argued that it is in the chapter with a certain individual symbol assigned to it: O. But where does this chapter, chapter O, come in the book? A foolish question, perhaps, but one that is deemed logical, under the conditions of reading of both book and archive (the latter, a form of institutional or private memory, depends upon issues such as provenance, or the dominant organizing principles of the archive, that is, generation or storage). If a momentary, random shuffling of the box-book equals x (... symbol ... symbol ... etc.), then the chapter can only be located in the sequence of x, or at the very least the surrounding chapters, giving something like: x = (..., O, O, + ...). There is a further indeterminacy, or subjective reordering, that must be taken into account: the possibility that someone else may shuffle the book in between individual readings, for example, if the book is a library copy that has been returned and then taken out again. In the latter case, x = (..., O, O, + ... ) becomes an even more ephemeral sequence. To preserve the sequence for the time of this reading, here are the juxtaposed sentences:

The area had to be this large in order to try to kill all the explosive, runaway, zealous, monstrous cells of the tumour: if one single cell escaped to another part of the body, by insinuating itself into the bloodstream, then it would grow and multiply there too. (O, p. 8)

The estate. That enormous flat. It seems enormous to me, now. But I was very ill there. I must have arrived at about four in the afternoon. Tony was there in the downstairs hall, on the phone. (O, p. 1)

I cannot place this, though, it will not fall into place. But it was certainly on that visit, that June was angry at my laziness, weariness, as we all three came in tired, Tony and I sat and talked, she had to prepare a meal on her own, for us. (O, p. 8)

Then he was doing research, enjoying not having the tie of lectures to attend, he said, or wrote, and they had moved from the Park, or the Estate, whatever it was called, and were living in one of the towns on the outskirts of this city, contiguous with it, really, at least connected by ribbon development, if it is not a suburb, it has its own name, something beginning with B, how soon I forget the simple things ... (O, p. 1)

The sequence disintegrates, no matter how many times it is reconstructed (there is, after all, nothing to stop someone actually placing the chapters in a certain order). Disintegration also happens materially, as the chapters yellow and fall apart: what is left is an even looser ‘manuscript’ format, with fragile leaves of paper that disrupt further the symbol-based system of location and citation, a manuscript that works through subtraction as well as ludic iteration.

There is a sense in which the box-book cannot let go – even though the narrator is struggling with memory, with the act of remembrance: shuffling and re-reading the book is as compulsive as the narrator’s attempt to weave a coherent pattern out of life’s ludicrous arbitrariness. The narrator deals in fragments, but their interweaving constructs a totality, a ‘Total object, complete with missing parts’. As with the above observation on translation from Friedrich Burschell, there is a ‘passionate compulsion’ in The Unfortunates, one which aims to account for all that has been experienced in relation to Tony. This passionate compulsion is that of the chronicler:

the ‘historian’ of the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ inherited certain qualities from the chronicler. A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a citation a l’ordre du jour – and that is Judgement Day.6

The reconstitution of the memories that are called ‘Tony’ may be a fragile, ephemeral, even subtractive affair, but nonetheless, in the compulsion to bring him back, all of his past becomes viable grist for the historical mill. It is no coincidence that Tony’s subjectivity as such is tied in with the experience of revisiting a city – ‘But I know this city!’ – just as it is no coincidence that The Arcades Project is fundamentally a city-space (both cities in question offer a refractive vision which is problematic and liberating or productive). Howard Caygill argues that the ‘understanding of urban experience through the use of spatio-temporal contrasts and counterfactuals is not only an epistemological device for gaining knowledge of urban experience, but itself a feature of modern urban experience.’

This includes the haunting of the city, the ghosts and the projected desires or fantasies of the city inhabitants.
Just gaming: Benjamin, Johnson and Wittgenstein

Are these texts – *The Arcades Project* and *The Unfortunates* – examples of performative meaning? That is to say, do these texts function by generating meanings that are tied in to a particular configuration in the present play that we call their reading? Put another way, can we say that plot and story are performed by the reader as such, and that the reader does not have to rely on abstracted systems of thought to make sense of the texts in question, because each reconfiguration is the meaning of the text? In this case any particular interpretive guide to the text(s) would be redundant. This appears too ludic by far, too postmodern, too relativistic, as if the texts could say anything and mean anything. There are definite, related processes at work in both texts, which means that they have a family resemblance, where the latter is defined not as a shared, single property but as a bundle of traits or a whole series of overlapping similarities. As Wittgenstein puts it in the *Philosophical Investigations*: ‘we see [in family resemblance] a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail’. To map out the family resemblance is to trace not the shared architectural framework upon which both texts hang, but instead the structures and processes which make these texts compulsive reading, structures and processes that make the reading of these texts both a painful and a pleasurable experience. They are both, potentially, fetishized objects, collectibles, collectors’ items, lavishly packaged in an age of cheap and tacky mass production. Both texts play with ‘reproduction’, strategically inserting themselves into the market economies that they also resist. In some ways *The Arcades Project* now looks like a particularly big airport crime-thriller or pornographic novel, with the cut-out hole to peer in at Benjamin himself, who may actually be peeping out. Removing the loose cover sleeve reveals large, garish lettering on the spine: perhaps it will wear off in time? The 1999 edition of *The Unfortunates* seems to strive to look as disappointingly normal as possible, although there is something essentially ‘retro’ about the title itself, with its mock ‘Dymo Tape’ appearance, as if it had been hand-made and simply stuck on to the box. Both texts play with appearances, suggesting by their covers or containers strikingly different books from the ones found inside. From this first point of material contact, the texts are subtly (or not so subtly) manipulating the reader. Fogelin has noted a related quality in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, where the intention is not simply to put across a different systematic viewpoint, but to engage the reader in an act of persuasion: ‘This work is not primarily an attack upon particular solutions to philosophical problems, but an inquiry into the moves that initiate philosophical reflection: for the most part it is not a criticism of the results of philosophizing, but an interrogation of its source.’ Wittgenstein’s circuitous methodology – annoying, confusing at times, irritating at others – is designed to engage the reader in working out problems for himself or herself; it also forces the reader back to the text, over and over again.

Introductory accounts of the *Philosophical Investigations* take a necessarily considerable amount of time looking at the text’s methodology, just as with *The Arcades Project* and *The Unfortunates*; all three texts are written with an acute awareness of the reader’s engagement with form, and all three distinctly disrupt normative reading processes. In a Russian Formalist sense, these texts ‘make strange’ normative reading processes, foregrounding the ways in which ‘normative’ can actually be more accurately described as ‘normalizing’ (an active self-negation of the text’s architectonics). In the texts under discussion, however, ‘making strange’ is also intricately tied in with ‘persuasion’: the embedded notion that the reader has been conned or duped elsewhere by normalizing narratives. For Benjamin, it is the narratives of capitalism that need disruption; for Johnson, it is narratives of determinate remembrance and/or memorialization. Benjamin and Johnson both break processes of perception and representation down into component parts: in the process of this fragmentation we learn not only how they work, but how they might work differently. This latter can lead to a rejection not just of the text itself, but also of the methods of its author: Johnson’s experimentalism, for example, can be dismissed as mere inconsequential playfulness, or an empty obsession with form; Benjamin’s project can be dismissed as incomplete, lacking the master’s final configuration of the dialectical images, a kind of commendatory compliment, whereby the suggestion is that the text would have ultimately worked, but it just does not quite work now. Such disgruntled rejection fails to take into account the ephemeral nature of these texts, their multiple successes and failures that occur with each reading; this ephemeral nature is one of their key family resemblances. Of course saying that texts share certain key features is not
to argue that they are identical; Fogelin illuminates precisely this point with the following diagram:  

\[
\begin{array}{ccccccc}
0_1 & 0_2 & 0_3 & 0_4 & 0_5 & 0_6 \\
A & B & C & D & E & F \\
B & C & D & E & F & A \\
C & D & E & F & A & B \\
D & E & F & A & B & C \\
\end{array}
\]

The key element here is the fact that there is a common thread of three shared features with two other groups (where 0 equals a group) 'but there is no single feature that runs through the lot.'  

A similar table can be produced where Johnson's and Benjamin's texts stand as 'groups', with the following list of features: A = performative; B = shufflable chapters; C = dialectical images; D = fixed constellations; E = variable constellations; F = autobiographical; G = historical analysis; H = subject or memory analysis; I = 'makes strange' the reading process . . . etc. The table could be constructed thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Arcades Project</th>
<th>The Unfortunates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>B</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td>[etc.]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear that the texts are not identical, but they have significant shared features; not to labour the point, this turn to family resemblance is necessary to move away from an overly critically 'fixed' product. This was precisely one of the objectives of Wittgenstein's methodological shift, where family resemblance 'helps dispel the commitment to definiteness of sense by exhibiting a set of concepts that violate this standard but are still perfectly serviceable . . . [in] the Tractatus . . . this demand for definiteness of sense was a driving

force that led away from everyday language as it actually appears to the postulation of a sublime structure that underlies it.' Cruelly put in literary-critical terms, readings of texts often move from text to system, abstracting the text via appreciative, intuitive or more obviously theory-driven strategies of reading (I include 'appreciative' and 'intuitive' as being in themselves theories of reading), whereas what is important in The Arcades Project and The Unfortunates is the engagement with the text as a re-occurring process and the temporary interpretive framework(s) brought to bear. For example, what if I decide to shuffle The Unfortunates every time I read it? What if I decide to re-shuffle the book as I read it, rather than shuffling and reading the entire text sequentially? This constant re-shuffling is closer to my actual experience of The Unfortunates and the way in which I dip in and out of Benjamin's convolutes.

Here is an example of what happens during a constantly re-shuffled reading of The Unfortunates, using chapter * as the starting point of a small three-chapter sequence (that is, starting from this chapter each time I come across it after having re-shuffled the book), placed into a 'family resemblance' chart (n = reading number for example N1 equals the number of times the box-book has been re-shuffled, where a 'shuffle' equals a random sequence of interleaving):

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How does this compare with my dipping in and out of the convolutes? While I do read the convolutes themselves in different sequences, there is also the issue of dipping in and out of a single convolute. Does this mean that The Arcades Project functions like a doubled version of The Unfortunates (where a convolute has re-shufflable entries, and the convolutes themselves can be re-shuffled)? I tend to read through an entire convolute, or sections of a convolute, in a fairly linear fashion, once my attention has been caught, even given any re-ordering; these readings could be described as macro- and micro-re-ordering, for example: 'macro-shuffling' for summer of 2001: n + 1 = convolute D + K + N; n + 2 = convolutes D + K + N + Early Drafts + Addenda; micro-shuffling
resources of a unique experience and a singular intelligence in order
to counter the intellectual conformity of the environment, and that
associates a sort of historical mission with this subversive status
of subjectivity. The dream and personal experience are instrumenta-
lized in the name of a cause of general interest and are invested with
historical significance.50

Fairly early on in ‘One-Way Street’ – in the sequence or section
‘Chinese Curios’ – Benjamin theorizes two types of relationship with
the text: that of the reader versus that of the copier. There is a
tension between the text’s interpretive control, that is, the text’s own
textual affects, and reading as adjacency whereby the text is virtually
ignored by the reader (although it may create the grounds for
reading as the ‘free flight’ of dreaming):

The power of a country road when one is walking along it is dif-
ferent from the power it has when one is flying over it by airplane.
In the same way, the power of a text when it is read is different
from the power it has when it is copied out. [. . .] Only the copied
text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it,
whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his
inner self that are opened by the text; that road cut through the
interior jungle forever closing behind it; because the reader follows
the movement of his mind in the free flight of daydreaming,
whereas the copier submits it to command.51

The command of the text arises from immersion and mimesis: the
copying and reproduction of text, or the reader as scribe; without
naming the outmoded subject, the secular or theological scribe is
compared with a rambler wandering down a country road, whereas
the reader as dreamer is analogous to the perspective of flight. The
aphorism is about the scribbler as someone who travels (or works
through, travaile) a text, submitting to the command. But what
precisely is the command, or the experience of the command? Ben-
jamin appears to be arguing that the perspective of the rambler
(copier) is superior to that of the flyer (reader) because the latter
perceives the external laws of the terrain’s or text’s organization,
whereas the former ‘learns of the power it commands’ which is
expanded thus: ‘from the very scenery that for the flyer is only the
unfurled plain, it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings,
prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at
a front.’52 The shifting, multiple perspectives of the rambler or copier
opens up a multitude of further perspectives. But why the military discourse of strategic deployment? The passage also narrates the existential experience of passing through a landscape or text: the aerial view is that of ‘armchair’ generals or strategists examining a distant view or simulacrum of the battlefield, whereas the rambler or commander is immersed in multiple perspectival unfolding experiences. It would appear that the position of greatest freedom offers a perspective so detached that it misses altogether the experiences themselves (it becomes an experience of self-obsession).

Commanding and the call of the command are linked to freedom and perspectivism, which announces another intertextual field beyond the notion of the scribe: the open, perspectival texts of Nietzsche. Reading Nietzsche, Heidegger also ponders the ‘commanding nature of knowledge’ where he argues that ‘the word command does not mean merely making a demand known and requiring its fulfillment’:

True commanding is obedience to what is taken on in free responsibility, perhaps even first created. Essential commanding first posits the whither and wherefore. Commanding as making known a demand already directed, and commanding as founding this demand and taking on the decision contained in it, are fundamentally different. Original commanding and being able to command always arise only from freedom and are themselves fundamental forms of true being free. Freedom – in the simple and profound sense that Kant understood its essence – is in itself poetizing; the groundless grounding of a ground, in such a way that it grants itself the law of its essence. But commanding means nothing other than this.

The lesson learnt via ‘command’ is that the text has its own necessity, furthermore, as Heidegger argues, necessity, or ‘the must of commanding and poetizing’, actually arises from freedom. Benjamin’s aphorism is a warning: do not think that the emphasis upon dream and surreality in ‘One-Way Street’ means that the text is merely a free-play of (purely relativistic) meaning, but, also, do follow the text closely, even as far as to reproduce it, to experience the text’s command. Heidegger’s division between two types of command reveals a fundamental or grounding difference: in fact in the extract quoted, commanding is a faithfulness to what Derrida calls ‘différance’ (‘the nonunitary synthesis of all these very different types of difference and, as such, the matrix from which they draw their existence’). The contradictory-sounding non-originary origin is thus another way of thinking Heidegger’s poetizing, or ‘the groundless grounding of a ground’. Can Derrida’s ‘différance’ find its way back to itself, however, as Heidegger’s question appears to demand as an essential component or force of the command? Benjamin’s command is also a strategic deployment that opens up perspectives: the command determines the placing of the subject in relation to the perspectives, but does not compose the perspectives themselves (and within the perspectives are new landscapes that contain buildings used for the gaining of a view, for example, the belvedere). This is deliberately to utilize or put on the mask of Frank’s analysis of ‘différance’:

If the meaning-producing movement of différance . . . determines the places of possible positivities, it is not also a positivity itself: it should be considered neither as a subject nor as a substance nor as something present nor even as something at all. In this sense it can be called ‘autonomous’ like Hegel’s negation. This, to be sure, has an implication Derrida does not express in this way, one that we, however, need to supply here: différance makes relations possible, and it cannot exist without an open field of relations between givens; yet it itself does not participate in the play of these relations (otherwise it would be something, and not the condition of possibility), and in this sense it has to be taken to be absolutely singular and relationless, like Hegel’s negation. In other words, différance, although it is the condition of possibility for the play of differentiations, is itself, however, still distinguished from this play; it does not exist without this play, but it is not the play itself; and it does not exist due to this play . . .

How far from Benjamin’s ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ have we travelled with the non-originary grounding or command of the aphorism in his ‘One-Way Street’, where the scribe comes to discover ‘new aspects of his inner self’? The aphorism form in Benjamin functions as an incredibly condensed version of the esoteric essay, while traces of doctrine are deeply buried, but are nonetheless maintained; the aphorism’s force is one which powers or produces multiple conceptual possibilities, and it is still a mode of maintenance.

The aphorism has been thoroughly explored elsewhere in relation to the form of Nietzsche’s philosophy, although this can also be read as an evasion of the full force of Nietzsche’s radically different styles. Nehamas notes how Nietzsche’s aphorisms are often hyperbolic, simultaneously working via form to ‘disarm’ hyperbole.
through a process of quarantine and isolation: 'The aphorism has bracketed the hyperbole [in Nehamas's example from *The Gay Science*]; it prevents it from functioning as part of a continuous narrative or, more important, as a premise in an argument. The spaces that separate aphorisms from one another also act as frames that magnify the power of exaggeration within them but don't allow it to penetrate beyond their confines.'² Benjamín's command aphorism both is quarantined and interpenetrates the entire sequence of *Einbahnstrasse*; the notion of an enclosed aphorism, a kind of monadology of aphorisms, is replaced with the aphorism as generating a non-originary origin or groundless ground, whether read in the Derridean or the Heideggerian sense. The former would assert that each aphorism is a ‘bundle’ or convolute of traces (‘Every trace is the trace of a trace’), whereas the latter would assert that command is one Nietzschean category of life, the others being poetizing, the perspectival and the horizontal.²² Benjamín's aphorisms are monadological and differential: they ‘replicate’ via the matrix and are folded in the Deleuzian sense. In *Imperial Panorama* (‘A Tour through the German Inflation’), the perspectival view of the individual, divorced from a sense of society or community, is problematized:

A blind determination to save the prestige of personal existence — rather than, through an impartial disdain for its impotence and entanglement, at least to detach it from the background of universal delusion — is triumphing almost everywhere. That is why the air is so thick with life theories and world views, and why in this country they cut so presumptuous a figure, for almost always they finally serve to sanction some utterly trivial private situation. For just the same reason the air is teeming with phantoms, mirages of a glorious cultural future breaking upon us overnight in spite of all, for everyone is committed to the optical illusions of his isolated standpoint.²³

How do we distinguish the positive multiple and perspectival unfolding of experiences from the 'optical illusions' of the 'isolated standpoint'? One approach is to become immersed in the 'recurrent themes' of the aphorism sequence: 'an ethnography of cities, reflections on love, childhood memories, transcriptions of dreams, and remarks on the revolutionary crisis of humanity.'²⁴ Benjamín's aphorisms attack the boundaries between competing spheres of reality: 'Metaphorically or literally, he effaces the opposition between public life and private life, exterior and interior (furnishings and the soul

living among them), the human and the animal, conscious thought and the dream; in his view, these separations are characteristic of "bourgeois" thought, which is responsible for all abstraction.'²⁵ The decomposition of bourgeois boundaries utilizing the tropes of narrative and aphorism is an early example and after-effect of what Benjamín will call 'spectrum analysis'.²⁶ That is to say, the decomposition is not an arbitrary critical act, but one designed to discover the origin or source of society's ills. While this is clearly a shift into 'materialist' analysis, it is not an abandonment of the concept of the Messianic: 'Just as a physicist determines the presence of ultraviolet light in the solar spectrum, so the historical materialist determines the presence of a messianic force in history.'²⁷ But Benjamín does add that the attempt to know the parameters of a redeemed society involves posing questions to which there are no straightforward answers. The aphorism as spectrum analysis involves a dialectic of observation and critical decomposition: ultimately, the aphorism, in Benjamín's hands, turns upon itself (aphorism as boundary-setting form versus aphorism as deconstructive form).

As boundary-setting form, the aphorism in 'One-Way Street' is always already contaminated by narrative, by the expansionist tendencies of prose, regardless of its opposing intra-deconstructive force; such a contamination leads to the thoughts on 'good prose' and the three steps: 'a musical stage when it is composed, an architectonic one when it is built, and a textile one when it is woven.'²⁸ Prose should not be thought of in opposition to spectrum analysis: rather, it forms a constellation that Benjamín develops via Leskow where the different types of 'artistic' prose embody the entire spectrum of historical types.²⁹ 'One-Way Street' is written in 'liberated prose', that is to say, it belongs to the realm of technical reproduction. The aphorism as sequence of observations has an elective affinity with that of the output of the chronicler; the aphorism as intra-deconstructive force gives it the analytical and interpretive power of the historian:

it will take no effort to gauge the difference between one who writes history (the historian) and one who narrates it (the chronicler). The chronicler’s task is to explain in one way or another the happenings with which he deals; under no circumstances can he content himself with simply displaying them as models of the course of the world. But this is precisely what the chronicler does, especially in his classical avatars... By basing their historical tales on a divine — and
inscrutable – plan of salvation, at the very outset they have lifted the burden of demonstrable explanation from their own shoulders. Its place is taken by interpretation, which is concerned not with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world.

Whether this course is determined by salvation history or by natural history makes no difference. In the storyteller the chronicle is preserved in changed form – secularized, as it were.74

But where is the sequence of aphorisms, and their dialectics of revealing and interpreting, to be published? As a book? Is such a framing device still acceptable to Benjamin? The traditional form of the book, Benjamin argues, is nearing its end.75 The book, that is to say the Lutheran Bible, belonged essentially to the people (a similar argument could be made for Tyndale's English Bible, and then the Authorized, or King James); the contemporary book is penetrated, ruthlessly introverted or ripped inside out and appropriated by the visual methods of capitalism, primarily via advertising: 'Script ... is pitilessly dragged out into the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos. This is the hard schooling of its new form.' Benjamin traces modernist texts that experiment with typographic excess, mentioning Mallarmé and the Dadaists, but his real interest lies in the new technologies that are replacing the book itself, such as the 'card index' and statistical and technical diagrams.76 In parentheses, Benjamin adds that the contemporary book is 'an outdated mediation between two different filing systems. For everything that matters is to be found in the card box of the researcher who wrote it, and the scholar studying it assimilates it into his own card index.'77 The outmoded book, if not blasted apart by the typographic excesses of modernism and capitalism, is raided and sampled by the scholar, for his or her card index. We can think of The Arcades Project as precisely this type of archiving technology, with its concomitant apparatus of information categorization and retrieval. The opposing antiquated 'Fat Book' is parodied in the aphorism 'Teaching Aid': its bloated repetitious nature is ridiculed and offers a foil for the apparently equally 'bloated' text of The Arcades Project: given a computational approach, the permutations of the latter are not regarded as excessive, merely indicative of the devices needed to maintain vast modern databases ('keep your notebook as strictly as the authorities keep their register of aliens').

Notes

3 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, p. 461 [N2a.1].
4 Ibid.
5 Duchamp, A l'infinitif/in the Infinitive, p. 5.
7 Duchamp, A l'infinitif/in the Infinitive, p. 7.
11 Ibid., p. 86.
13 Ibid., p. 172.
15 See, for example, boundary 2, special issue: Benjamin Now: Critical Encounters with The Arcades Project; see also Esther Leslie, ‘Elemental: Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project’, in A. Benjamin and Osborne, eds., Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience, pp. 304–308, appendix 2.
18 Ibid., p. xi.
22 Benjamin to Gerhard Schollem, 30 October 1928, letter 181 in The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940, p. 342.
24 Ibid.
26 Playing with these texts may be closer to gambling than reading as we conventionally know it, where the most important critical moves are made rapidly and ‘. . . at the last possible moment’ (Benjamin, ‘Notes on a Theory of Gambling’, Selected Writings, vol. ii: 1927–1934, p. 297). Furthermore, compression and acceleration of time through the reader’s intervention (and this is different from jumping ahead a few chapters: the reader literally compresses events) is one of the defining features of gambling, of play, as Anatole France argues: ‘what is play. . . but the art of producing in a second the changes that Destiny ordainly effects only in the course of many hours or even many years, the art of collecting into a single instant the emotions dispersed throughout the slow-moving existence of ordinary men, the secret of living a whole lifetime in a few minutes. . . ?’ (The Garden of Epicurus, trans. Alfred Allinson, London: Bodley Head, 1926, p. 23). Finally, then, a theory of dynamic modernist narrative must take into account the ‘hand-to-hand encounter with Fate’ (ibid.) that is the experience of reading Benjamin’s and Johnson’s texts.
27 Foster, Compulsive Beauty, p. 19.
28 Ibid., p. 20.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p. 21.
31 Ibid.
33 Quoted in Brodersen, Walter Benjamin: A Biography, p. 166.
34 Ibid., p. 169.

DISRUPTING TEXTUAL ORDER

36 Ibid., p. 115.
37 Bowie, Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche, p. 43.
38 Duchamp, À l’infini! In the infinitive, p. 20: crossed out by hand in the original.
42 Fogelrn, Wittgenstein, p. 133.
44 Especially compared with the vibrant and striking packaging of the first edition.
45 Fogelrn, Wittgenstein, p. 110.
46 Ibid., p. 133.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., p. 138.
50 Rochlitz, The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin, p. 120.
52 Ibid.
54 Ibid., p. 118, p. 119.
55 Ibid., p. 121.
58 See Frank, What is Neostucturalism?, p. 270.
59 Ibid., p. 270.
63 Ibid., p. 23.
64 Bennington, Jacques Derrida, p. 75.
67 Rochlitz, The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin, p. 120.
68 Ibid.
Conclusion: exile and the time of crisis

Reconfiguring repetition

Repetition in Surrealist objective chance reveals not just a fore-life (the repressed event, that which fails to be recollected) but also an after-life of the experience (portents, prophetic signs, a warning and miraculous event); in other words, the time of Surrealist repetition is 'differential'. In what sense, then, can repetition be said to have actually taken place? In the casting of the work of art, Whiteread constructs an object (the after-life) from another object (the fore-life) that is destroyed or was not 'present' in the first place (the space under a chair, and so on). In the shuffling of Johnson's The Unfortunates, memorialization is produced precisely through the disruption, the deformation and the reconfiguration of narrative and/or textual order; memorialization is not re-call, but construction or affirmation through destruction. In both cases (Whiteread and Johnson), the resulting product is a memorial aesthetics that functions by citing without quotation marks. Andrew Benjamin notes that:

Apart from introducing the continuity of convention, the use of quotation marks works, conventionally, to mark the act of recitation and hence of what could be described as a re-situation. What the convention brings with it, in addition to itself, is a form of continuity. The quotation marks indicate that what is cited (and restated) is not new but is the reiteration of what has already been; an intended repetition of the Same in which the singularity of the past's content is itself maintained.

Both Whiteread and Johnson work against continuity, that is, repetition as a maintenance and reiteration (contributing also to a smooth art-historical progression); repetition, as Benjamin shows, can be radically reconfigured.