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# Divining Benjamin: Reading Fate, Graphology, Gambling



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Near the end of his 1929 essay on surrealism, and in the context of serious discussions of the occult, Walter Benjamin suggests a connection between investigations into reading and into telepathic phenomena,<sup>1</sup> a theme he returns to again, in the context of reading and more ancient traditions of magic, in his 1933 essay “Doctrine of the Similar.”<sup>2</sup> This connection he suggests between reading practices and the occult is a profound one, both historically and for Benjamin’s own time and work, and not just in terms of telepathy. Some of the earliest practices of reading were not of letters, words, or books, but of stars, entrails, and birds, and these practices had a significant impact on the way reading was understood in the ancient world. And the relations between such ancient magic and reading were still (or again) of crucial importance to the modernists of the early twentieth century, including Benjamin and his sustained interest in what he called ‘das magische Lesen.’

What I will present here is part of a larger project devoted to tracing out the more salient connections in both the ancient and modern worlds between the practices of reading and of magic, and particularly those of magic most closely aligned with practices of divination.

<sup>1</sup>Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., eds. Marcus Bullock, Howard Eiland, Michael Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), here: *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 216; *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1999), here: vol. 2, 307.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 694–98; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 204–10.

I choose to concentrate on those aspects of magic most associated with divination because these seem historically most associated with the reading of both literature and the world, and because I believe that tracing out the often ignored genealogy of this future or fortune-telling aspect of reading reveals one of the most fascinating chapters in the modern reception of antiquity.<sup>3</sup>

## I.

That Walter Benjamin was preoccupied with issues of magic and divination is clear. It figures prominently in his works, from the first paragraph of one of his earliest publications, "Fate and Character" (1919), to the last section of one of his last pieces, "On the Concept of History" (1940). But the exact nature of that preoccupation is not clear, even if it does seem remarkably consistent; indeed, as is characteristic of Benjamin's thought in so many other respects as well, the complexity of his position is not so much a matter of change or development as it is of an intricate mode of negation and affirmation that was there from the start. On the one hand, there is an undeniable suspicion, even rejection, of divination and "predicting the future" that runs throughout his work. We see it already in "Fate and Character," but it is even more evident in pieces such as "Light from Obscurantists," his review of Hans Liebenstoeckl's *The Occult Sciences in the Light of Our Age* (1932), or his essay "Experience and Poverty" (1933). Here, Benjamin unequivocally attacks what he calls the "stupidity, low cunning, and coarseness" of the contemporary modes of magical divination, "the last pitiful by-product of more significant traditions," and he seems explicitly to include in his critique of magic and fortune- or future-telling the misguided "hunger of broad sections of the people for happiness" (*Glückshunger*).<sup>4</sup> The resistance to magical thinking

<sup>3</sup>The larger study begins by considering ancient Greek divinatory practices as both modes of reading in their own right and as incorporated thematic elements in classical literary texts, and then explores the role of divination in the Neoplatonic readings of Homer and in the Biblical hermeneutics of Augustine, and uses this as a background for investigating the reemergence of magic reading in German Romanticism, in later nineteenth-century literature, anthropology, and psychology and, finally, in German modernist literature and theory, with a special focus on the work of Benjamin. For a first foray into this project that surveys both the ancient practices and Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar," see Eric Downing, "Magic Reading," in *Literary Studies and the Question of Reading*, eds. Eric Downing, Jonathan Hess, and Richard Benson (Rochester, NY: Camden House, forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup>Walter Benjamin, "Light from Obscurantists," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 653; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 356.

is obviously of a piece with his principled distaste for the tenets of “Lebensphilosophien”; for the phantasmagoria of commodity culture; the emergence of fascism with its “magic of blood and glitter”; and eventually, too, for that form of Marxism that divined future happiness in the fated progress of social history.<sup>5</sup> In all this, Benjamin could be said to share (along with Freud, Mann, and others) in the skeptical, disenchanted enlightenment stance that gained such increased urgency amid the resurgent “barbarism” of the early- to mid-twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> And added to this secular tradition, there was also a religious ground supporting Benjamin’s suspicions of divination as well. As he reminds us at the end of “On the Concept of History,” “Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future,” and while this ban on future-knowing is perhaps most fully explored in the context of his famous essay on Kafka, it seems safe to say that “No Future” is an injunction implicitly guiding much of his thought.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, many of the most traditional and defining features of magic reading repeatedly reappear as central elements to Benjamin’s thought, and are often explicitly identified with the practices of divination, and with reading as divination—and often enough in the very same essays that critique it. As I hope to show in part through what I present here, alongside Benjamin’s emphatic rejection of occult magic and its divinatory impulses there is an equally emphatic investment in precisely the magical traditions and divinatory practices we can trace from antiquity through the early modern period and even into Romanticism. For this reason it seems more accurate to claim, not that Benjamin is committed to the disenchantment of magic reading in his work, but that he is intent on clearing space for re-approaching and reasserting its truths. Not, then, to refute magic reading and assign it to some long lost past but, in however “weak” a form, to redeem it and its future promise.

## II.

As mentioned, Benjamin’s preoccupation with divination is evident already in “Fate and Character,” and some of the features that will

<sup>5</sup>For the magic of blood and glitter, *ibid.*, 655; 358.

<sup>6</sup>For barbarism, Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 732; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol 2, 215.

<sup>7</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 397; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, 704. There was, however, a Jewish tradition of sortilegia that partook of divination: see Christopher Wild, “*Apertio libri*: Codex and Conversion,” in *Literary Studies and the Question of Reading*, eds. Downing et al. (forthcoming).

shape his thinking on the topic throughout his writings are first formulated in this early essay, which strives to develop a concept of fate (*Schicksal*) that embraces both ancient Greek beliefs and modern fortune-telling of the most vulgar, popular kind (especially card- and palm-reading).<sup>8</sup> Crucially, Benjamin begins by posing the problem of fate (and character) as a matter of reading (*lesen*), and in particular as a matter of reading to predict the future (*die Zukunft herauszusagen*); and although he emphasizes right from the outset that such a reading practice is all but inconceivable for his contemporaries—and even that, in principle, he shares in the common critique and remains even more cautious than most about the idea of the future—he also sets out to show how the idea of such a reading is not nonsensical and how access to future fate need not exceed human powers of perception.<sup>9</sup> He bases his argument on a consideration of the relation between fate and signs—again, very much in keeping with approaching the problem in terms of reading. Fate, he says (and character), can only be apprehended through signs, not in itself, and such signs have a particular nature with particular features. First, the what they signify is always hidden, invisible, situated above the immediately visible (in a realm, he says, that is not “gegenwärtig,” even if “zur Stelle”).<sup>10</sup> Second, what makes these signs signs, what determines their sign quality, is that they signify a relationship or connection (*Zusammenhang*) between this other realm (this fate) and the given subject: it is this connection that the signs signify. Benjamin insists that the relation or connection between the sign and signified cannot, strictly speaking, be considered a causal one, at least not in any simple rational sense of causality, and this is what makes determining the nature of these signs and this connection so difficult—and has him decline for the present fully to explore what such a sign-system might be like.<sup>11</sup> But he does provide an analysis of two key features: things and time.

First, he notes that all apparent phenomena (*Erscheinungen*) of external life, in addition to the human body, can become signs of fate, of this hidden world and connection: this is in keeping with his insistence that between the active man and the external world all is interaction, their spheres interpenetrate, such that the idea of

<sup>8</sup>Walter Benjamin, “Fate and Character,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 201–06; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 171–79.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 201; 171.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 201; 172.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 202; 172. For more on this, see Walter Benjamin, “Analogy and Relationship,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 207–09; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 43.

a discrete individual “character” as the defining core of man—or of man’s relationship to the world—must give way to a far more porous boundary between the given subject and external world, to a connection in fact that surreptitiously binds him to all of life, natural life, or rather: binds him to the unseen world that determines both (him and the external world) and produces signs.<sup>12</sup> Benjamin defines this interpenetrating connection as a “Schuldzusammenhang,” although he also rejects the implicit religious context and more straightforwardly calls it a natural life in man (*ein natürliches Leben im Menschen*).<sup>13</sup> It is this well-nigh ontological connection to everything—to what Benjamin also calls bare life (*das bloße Leben*)—that allows the clairvoyant to connect the subject’s fate to cards, hand-lines or planets, sign-things that, simply by making the connection, make it visible—connect it.<sup>14</sup>

Second, Benjamin notes that the signs that make this connection—noncausal but binding, and unseen even if bound to everything visible—exist in a peculiar temporal modality. It is, he says, a very different kind of time, and “the complete elucidation of these matters depends on determining the particular nature of time in fate.”<sup>15</sup> Adumbrating some of his later claims about messianic time, he declares, “The fortune-teller who uses cards and the seer who reads palms teach us at least that this time can at every moment be made simultaneous with another (not present).”<sup>16</sup> It is not, he adds, an autonomous time (any more than its signs are autonomous), but parasitically dependent on another time (human, perhaps historical: sequential); it is a time that has no present and knows past and future only as particular (*eigentümliche*) variations.<sup>17</sup> And it is precisely the peculiar temporal dimension of the hidden world of fate and its intersection with a given moment in the inquiring subject’s time-world that informs and determines its signs, a temporality that both cuts against simple, causally conceived notions of a “future” and nonetheless keeps divinatory practices eminently viable.<sup>18</sup>

There is one additional issue raised in this early essay that is identified as essential but also left open: the question of happiness, fortune,

<sup>12</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 202; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 172.

<sup>13</sup>For “Schuldzusammenhang,” see *ibid.*, 204; 175.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 204; 176.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>For more on the connection between fate and divination in terms of this peculiar temporal structure, see the section “Nearness and Distance (Continued)” in “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 398; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 84.

or “Glück.” Benjamin poses the issue as a series of questions, asking: Has fate any relation (*Beziehung*) to “Glück”? Is “Glück” a constitutive category of fate?<sup>19</sup> His immediate response, much as with the question of predicting the future, seems to be no. But as in the case of predicting the future, the negative response might well be more about the limits of the present framework for posing the question—here the religious framework that interprets natural life as “Schuldzusammenhang”—than about the answer itself. In any case, the link between the two questions—of “Glück” and of the future—is hardly a chance one for Benjamin, nor is the matter of his apparent ambivalence about both. These two issues, both singly and joined, will reappear repeatedly in Benjamin’s thinking as points of contention, and remain central to his thoughts about reading.

### III.

After this early essay, there are three more or less separate spheres in which the still early Benjamin pursues and elaborates his investigations into magic reading, each of which provides essential background for his most comprehensive reflections on the topic in the late essays on “The Doctrine of the Similar” and “The Mimetic Faculty.” These three spheres are graphology, gambling, and childhood, and Benjamin approaches each as a modern avatar of more ancient traditions of magic and divination, and each as a site for a peculiar mode of magic reading and experience. Although the last mentioned is of indisputable importance, I will be concentrating here only on the first two.<sup>20</sup>

As a specialized mode of reading language, graphology is usually considered an invention of the nineteenth century, beginning in France

<sup>19</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 203; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 174.

<sup>20</sup>Among the reasons why the sphere of childhood is essential to Benjamin’s explorations into magic reading are these: because it is in this sphere that Benjamin most directly addresses the practice of reading not palms, cards, handwriting, or gambling tables, but books; because like many of his contemporaries, he tended to conflate ontogeny and phylogeny, and so to equate childhood experience with that of primitive and ancient cultures: hence, many of his most direct investigations into the “magische Erfahrung” that bound together ancient cognitive modes with modern times focus in the first place on childhood, when we remain “chained” to things; and finally, because it is here that Benjamin’s notions of a natural, material, fateful, and telepathic connection or contact between the (microcosmic) subject and the (macrocosmic) world of objects begin to be formulated more clearly in terms of a logic of mimetic relation, linkage, and exchange—a logic of resemblance and connection that secures perhaps the strongest resemblance and ties between his take on magic reading and that of the divinatory traditions of antiquity. A fourth reason, connected to Benjamin’s reflections on the divining memory of childhood experiences, will be touched on at the end of this essay.

with the work of Michon and Crépieux-Jamin and then migrating to Germany, where the “Lebensphilosoph” Ludwig Klages had a major impact on its development.<sup>21</sup> It was meant to be practiced by trained professionals, though well-read and gifted amateurs such as Benjamin himself could venture readings as well: the “reader”/ practitioner was to be guided by fixed points of reference in the script (direction, size, spacing, pressure, speed, etc.) with set meanings, but also by an intuitive sensitivity to the overall context and specific occasion of the writing.<sup>22</sup> For all the emphasis on its modernity and scientific basis, graphology still betrays its affinities with earlier traditions of magic reading such as extispicy or entrail-reading, not least through its purported scientificity and openness to the occasion; and for all Benjamin’s emphasis on distinguishing its “genuine” tenets from its popular and vulgar or dogmatically vitalistic strains, the mode of graphology in which he was most invested was equally distinct from rational empirical approaches (influenced by Wilhelm Wundt *et alii*), and still devoted to addressing “the integral riddle of mankind.”<sup>23</sup>

In reading, graphology attends to a form of meaning to written words that is ancillary to their semantic content; it seeks to read another, differently present realm of significance by decomposing words into the materiality and activity of their letters, even parts of letters; these are then construed as what Benjamin calls a set of hieroglyphs that, like allegories, function according to a differently ordered logic from that ruling their immediate, ordinary content and meaning.<sup>24</sup> That is, words are approached as signs of a different or additional kind from ordinary linguistic signs; this difference pertains at the level of both signifier and signified—and at the level of the connection between them, which is also established in different ways from ordinary language.

In respect to the signifier, graphology approaches words and letters as things, sign-things that convey something otherwise hidden, a mean-

<sup>21</sup>See H. J. Jacoby, *Analysis of Handwriting: An Introduction into Scientific Graphology*, 2nd ed. [1st ed. 1939] (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948); Klara G. Roman, *Handwriting: A Key to Personality* (New York: Pantheon, 1952).

<sup>22</sup>For Benjamin’s own forays into practicing graphology, see *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, eds. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 164, 338, 615.

<sup>23</sup>Benjamin’s texts on graphology include his “Review of the Mendelssohns’ *Der Mensch in der Handschrift*,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 131–34; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 135–39, and “Graphology Old and New,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 398–400; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, 596–98. The reference to the riddle is from the former, 131; 136.

<sup>24</sup>For handwriting as hieroglyphs, Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 132; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 136.



ing more or less unaffected by conscious intellection or intent—and therein lies both their status and privilege as signs. Benjamin calls these sign-things images, and insists they are part of the visible world (although, as we shall see, with extensions into the invisible).<sup>25</sup> But he also describes them as natural, well-nigh animate things. He does so in part because he rejects the “Zeichenlehre” of the French School that maintained a straightforward connection between image-sign and signified (e.g., cramped letters, cramped characters), but that also and above all held to a mono-semantic and *static* sense of signs. In this respect at least, Klages is privileged for his emphasis on the essential importance of *movement* for the sign-nature of script: it is only in the context of movement, the bodily material force of handwriting—which not incidentally introduces temporality into the line of writing, making it an essentially temporal space or realm—that the signs of script’s “other” language, the one beyond intention, become manifest and fix their otherwise open, polysemic meaning in an associational chain.<sup>26</sup> (Robert Saudek will emphasize the special importance of speed to this movement, a factor that will become important to us later on.)

Movement only partly explains why the image-signs of language are described as animate things. It is also partly something more than this, something intimately connected to the materiality of these image-signs—and not only as the result of the bodily material movement on the (human) writer’s part, but as bodily entities in their own right. Language, Benjamin says, has a body, and graphology is concerned with this bodily aspect of language. He illustrates what he means by this with a “most revealing and appropriate” comparison between children’s drawings and handwriting, wherein letters behave “just as their models—people, animals, and objects”—with tails and legs, heads, eyes, and mouths, and wherein reading them graphologically is a matter of transforming letters back into their bodily representations (*in körperliche Darstellungen zurückverwandeln*).<sup>27</sup> To some extent, this is about projecting the human condition onto externalized objects and animating them with a life or formative force that is not their own, and so reading them as a matter of transforming them back into human representations (more anon).<sup>28</sup> But to an equal and equally

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 132–33; 136–37.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. In at least some schools of graphology, these associational chains were called “constellations,” which is quite suggestive for Benjamin, not least in his apparent use of graphological terminology to describe the reading of astrological constellations in “Doctrine of the Similar.” See Jacoby, *Analysis of Handwriting*, passim.

<sup>27</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 133; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 138–39.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Roman, *Handwriting*, 136.

important extent, this is also about the direct, inherent connection of material words, qua things, with the material world, the thing-world (*die Dingwelt*) and hence natural world, and reading them as transforming them back into the representations that body forth that world, that life, and writing's connection to it. Both of these readings—and the reference to children suggests it—are of course very much in keeping with the ancient divinatory practice of reading animals themselves as animate signs, and of treating words in texts in the same way as animal-signs, even as themselves animate, natural signs (the ancients called them “characters”); and it helps give added force to Benjamin's stress on reading the swoops of hand strokes—“right and left, top and bottom, straight and sloping”—like so many bird-movements read by an augur.<sup>29</sup> In any case, in graphology as in ancient divination, the signs to be read are visual, moving objects—in this case words and letters—that operate apart from rational interference and from their normal significance and context; that function as animate signs—even as animals—implicitly grounded in a natural, bodily world; and precisely because they bypass the realm of human intent and participate instead in a sub-human, creaturely, non-(self)conscious realm, they are privileged signifiers for knowledge about the human.

In respect to the signified, and in keeping with their designation as hieroglyphs, Benjamin again insists that words and letters do not behave as ordinary signs and do not convey ordinary, exclusively “human”—much less conscious—meaning. In this context, he objects both to the French school, “whose proponents linked qualities of character to quite specific written signs,” and to Klages, who “interprets handwriting basically as [. . .] expressive movement.”<sup>30</sup> In each case, his objection seems to be that they refer far too directly and exclusively to a characterological realm of meaning, which is to say to a discretely human, individual, and ego-centered realm or core. This mistaken reading of handwriting as signs of character is of course the same error foregrounded (and sidelined) by Benjamin in respect to the signs of fate in “Fate and Character,” in which he also faulted modern physiognomy—the practice of directly reading the body as sign—for the

<sup>29</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 132; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 136. For the reading of animals as signs, see Derek Collins, “Mapping the Entrails: The Practice of Greek Hepatoscopy,” *American Journal of Philology* 129 (2008) 319–45 and “Reading the Birds: Oiōnomanteia in Early Epic,” *Colby Quarterly* 38 (2002) 17–41. For words or even letters, resp. “characters” as animate natural beings, see Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World* (Oxford UK: Blackwell, 2008) 73, 75–77.

<sup>30</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 399; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, 597. See also Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 132; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 137.

same misguided focus.<sup>31</sup> In each case, Benjamin is intent on rejecting a strictly individual (and merely human) contextualization and one that appeals primarily to known, present features of that individual.

Against the sign theories and readings of the French and Klages, Benjamin poses those of Anja and Georg Mendelssohn (who first institutionalized graphology in German universities), which he says create a space for an ideographic interpretation of handwriting, “a graphology that interprets script in terms of the unconscious graphic elements, the unconscious image fantasies, that it contains.”<sup>32</sup> As he will put it later with specific reference to “this magic aspect of language” (*diese magische Seite der Sprache*), their graphology teaches us “to recognize, in handwriting, images—or more precisely, picture puzzles—that the unconscious of the writer conceals in his writing.”<sup>33</sup> As the references to images as fantasies, to “Vexierbilder,” and to the unconscious all make clear, and as Benjamin explicitly declares, the Mendelssohns’ sign-theory and the “concealed” realm it signifies point to Freud, whose concepts of wish-fulfillment, dream-signs, and a hidden other realm of forces beyond the conscious or intentional are certainly some of the most dominant forms that the ancient tradition of magic, symbols, and their divination took in the modern world. But for all the affinities to be explored between Freud and Benjamin in respect to magic reading, and for all the affirmation of Freud implicit in his positive review of the Mendelssohns’ work, Benjamin’s position is still somewhat different from Freud’s and the Mendelssohns’, and in ways that, I believe, reveal his even stronger ties to the more ancient traditions.

The differences between Benjamin and the Freudians can be glimpsed most clearly in Benjamin’s designating the “other” realm signified by the “other” dimension of handwriting not as the unconscious but as the body.<sup>34</sup> That is, Benjamin says not only that language

<sup>31</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 204, 206; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 175, 178–79.

<sup>32</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 399; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, 598. Perhaps a difference can be discerned between this and Gestalt-based theories, which suppose an image “in mind” that the writer consciously tries to follow in his writing.

<sup>33</sup>Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” 697; 208.

<sup>34</sup>One of the best places to pinpoint the distinctions between Freud’s and Benjamin’s positions on this matter comes in a passage where they seem to come closest together. In a letter to Gretel Adorno, Benjamin mentions a passage in one of Freud’s essays in which he (Benjamin) finds expressed some of his own ideas. The passage concerns telepathy (and for graphology, and gambling, as divinatory forms of telepathy, see below): “The telepathic process is supposed to consist in a mental act in one person instigating the same mental act in another person. What lies between these two mental

has a body—even, as we saw, an animality—but that the body has a language, and graphology explores both the bodily aspect of the language of handwriting and the “speaking” aspect of the body in handwriting (*was an der Sprache der Handschrift das Leibhafte, am Leibe der Handschrift das Sprechende ist*).<sup>35</sup> For Benjamin it is the body of the given subject that is projected on, speaks through, and is connected to the body representations of script, a natural, indeed physical and material connection that underwrites the “magical” correspondences between the two. As in “Fate and Character,” the connections that although unseen bind the embodied subject to, and are made visible by, these sign-things are evidence of their common ground in a not-specifically human natural world—hence the shared basis of the twin sources for the natural, creaturely life of script, in the human subject and the material letters alike. It is just this hidden connection and correspondence, this common and shared ground that on the one hand determines that the relation between the signifier and signified in the given word is not the arbitrary one of ordinary language and its ordinary semantic and cognitive modes, and is instead a well-nigh ontological relation—and herein crucially different from Freudian dream language—with its human projections always also

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acts may easily be a physical process into which the mental one is transformed at one end and which is transformed back once more into the same mental one at the other end [. . .]. [O]nly think if one could get hold of this physical equivalent of the psychical act! It would seem to me that psychoanalysis, by inserting the unconscious between what is physical and what was previously called ‘psychical’, has paved the way for the assumption of such processes as telepathy [. . .]. It is a familiar fact that we do not know how the common purpose comes about in the great insect communities: possibly it is done by means of a direct psychical transference of this kind. One is led to a suspicion that this is the original, archaic method of communication between individuals and that in the course of phylogenetic evolution it has been replaced by the better method of giving information with the help of signals which are picked up by the sense organs. But the older method might have persisted in the background and still be able to put itself into effect under certain conditions.” Sigmund Freud, “Dreams and Occultism,” in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, vol. 23, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1999) 55. Benjamin calls particular attention to the insect example, which unlike Freud’s own insertion of an unconscious between the physical and the psychical entails a more or less direct corporeal connection, one that, insofar as it does persist in the human case, would subtend both conscious and unconscious communications or contacts. I suspect Benjamin supposes that the unconscious might well be a different, and possibly distorting, medium from that of the body (*ein natürliches Leben im Menschen*) itself. For Benjamin’s letter, Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 952–53; mentioned in Sarah Ley Roff, “Benjamin and psychoanalysis,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 126. I should add that Max Pulver seems to have embraced a somewhat similar position regarding the biological focus of graphological analysis.

<sup>35</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 133; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 138.

natural connections; and on the other hand determines that the truth or fate signaled in and through script is not revealing of a discrete individual character but of a necessarily open relation, or participation, of each subject with the external physical world—including the natural materiality of words.

This, too, is part of Benjamin's distance both from the French school and Klages and from Freud, who not only overlooks the creaturely body in favor of the human unconscious, but whose primary analyses also focus on individual character, even if unconscious. But Benjamin's position here remains much closer to that in "Fate and Character," when he claims that individual characters do not have a fate, or rather, that the signs of fate do not pertain to individual character but only to a natural life in him—the same position he adopts regarding the signs of physiognomy, and a position also, of course, much closer to that of the ancient traditions, perhaps especially to that of the Neoplatonists.<sup>36</sup> This is emphatically manifest in Benjamin's closing thoughts in his main essay on graphology, which push the points of de-individualization and de-psychologization and, instead, worldly connection, and do so in a language deliberately evocative of the magic, allegorical reading modes of the early modern world—which was already implicit in Benjamin's referring to words and letters in the first place not as dream-images or even picture-puzzles, but as hieroglyphs, a word whose association for Benjamin with the allegorical traditions of the Baroque can be traced back to his "Trauerspiel" book. In his final sentences, Benjamin challenges modern graphologists to consider not comparing different individual examples to prove discrete individualized identities, but to refer instead simply to a single sample of handwriting (*eine einzige Handschrift*), and declares, "Anyone able to share in their way of seeing would be able to take any scrap of paper covered with writing and discover in it a free ticket to the great *theatrum mundi* [*das große Welttheater*]. It would reveal to him the pantomime of the entire nature and existence of mankind, in microcosmic form."<sup>37</sup>

Clearly, in positing this almost mystical connection or participation, this magical correspondence between the body-nature of man and of words—and by extension between man, language, and the great external world—Benjamin is approaching not only the "sympa-

<sup>36</sup>See note 31. We might say Benjamin sees graphology as a physiognomy of words, physiognomy as a graphology of the body.

<sup>37</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 134; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 139.

thetic” logic of earlier times, but also the “Lebensphilosophien” and occult sciences of his own—precisely those positions he claims to find intolerable.<sup>38</sup> And this seeming ambivalence is even more evident in those moments where his explication of graphology comes closest to those concerns most associated with magic reading: prediction and clairvoyance or telepathy.<sup>39</sup> On the one hand, Benjamin seems rather forcefully to deny any straightforward predictive power to graphology, especially when it comes to divining any future individual action (or fate?)—indeed, he seems to suggest an ethical imperative against such reading.<sup>40</sup> But it is worth noting two points. First, that his reason for this restriction echoes the language he used in “Fate and Character” to describe the peculiar temporality of fate that likewise complicated its divinatory dimension: all possible actions and outcomes, he says, are essentially pre-existent potentialities that remain hidden and unrealized and emerge into conscious realization only at the moment of chance intersection with a concrete specific occasion.<sup>41</sup> And second, although Benjamin doesn’t foreground this point, the future does play a crucial role in the graphologist’s reading of the signs, the moving line of writing itself, serving as a directional space toward which all script tends, and keeping open and then finally fixing the meaning, the sign-quality, of the hand strokes themselves—which without that implicit futurity and until that future moment remain hidden, unrealized, unknown. Graphology might not be required to read signs of the future, but it does require the future to read the signs at hand.

On the other hand, for all his reluctance regarding prediction, Benjamin seems quite willing to grant both clairvoyance and telepathy a place in graphological reading. He describes what he calls a “cubic” graphology, which sees beyond the only apparently two-

<sup>38</sup>The connections between the microcosmic and macrocosmic realms were thought to be mediated by the force that the Stoics and Neoplatonists called *sympatheia*, a sense of participation in a common *logos* that connects all parts of nature by contact and likeness. The idea is key to the conception of sympathetic magic elaborated by Sir James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1956) and persists, via the Neoplatonists, as an often undervalued center of the Romantic notion of sympathy, not least in the practice of sympathetic reading. For Benjamin’s rejection of the graphological doctrines of the Lebensphilosophien and occult sciences, see Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 133; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 137.

<sup>39</sup>The connection of magic reading with telepathy as well as divination is a concern in “Doctrine of the Similar” as well; see also the essay on Surrealism as well as the fragments on gambling discussed below. As suggested above (note 34), telepathy is also an ongoing preoccupation of Freud’s.

<sup>40</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 137; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 139.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

dimensional surface of writing into an invisible realm both behind and before the visible material plane, a realm into which the visual script-signs extend in “immaterial curves,” and he asks, “Could the cubic pictorial space of script be a copy in microcosm of a clairvoyant space?” (*Ob der kubische Bildraum der Schrift ein mikrokosmisches Abbild des Erscheinungsraumes der Hellsicht ist?*), and he predicts “that one day it may be possible to exploit graphology to investigate telepathic events.”<sup>42</sup> (We could speculate that this three-dimensionality brings out or accentuates the body-nature of script, but this would require ourselves to enter an immaterial and clairvoyant space.) What we see, then, in Benjamin’s description of graphology that connects it back to earlier traditions of magic reading is this: it approaches words as conveying an ancillary mode of signification attendant on their ordinary, intended, and differently present meaning, where signs speak of a cognitive mode distinct from rational consciousness and point instead to another hidden world both inside and around us; that this world that animates signs—and so makes them signs—is in essential ways a natural, even animal, one that connects man to language in ways that bypass the most exclusively human dimension of the world, recognizing or realizing both as linked in invisible but fully natural ways; and that, precisely in this non-human and invisible form, the “magic” reading of script makes visible in microcosmic form the very nature of “the integral riddle of mankind”<sup>43</sup> and its relation to the great external world or “Welttheater.”<sup>44</sup>

#### IV.

The two major elements of ancient magic reading that were also adumbrated in “Fate and Character” but play only an implicit role in the discussion of graphology are front and center in Benjamin’s musings on gambling, namely the elements of time—including the matters of both occasionality and futurity—and of “Glück”—including the matters of both chance and fortune, happenstance and happiness. E. B. Tylor specifically singled out sports and games of chance as one of the last remaining refuges for magic thinking in the modern world, expanding on or supplementing Michel Foucault’s singular focus on literature; and Benjamin’s interest in such gaming is primarily (if not

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 133–34; 139.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 131; 136.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 134; 139.



exclusively) concentrated on its magic thinking, which he explicitly identifies as a mode of reading and as a form of divination.<sup>45</sup> This interest links some of Benjamin's earliest work to a chain extending all the way to the *Arcades Project*, and proves a somewhat surprising nodal point connecting some of his most crucial ideas about reading (and not only about reading).

Although in the *Arcades Project* Benjamin describes playing cards as modern remnants of more ancient fortune-telling cards, and card-play itself as a "pejoration of ancient divinatory technique," insisting that "seeing the future is certainly crucial in card games, too," the primary example of gambling in his works is not cards but roulette and its particular mode of reading the table (*das Brett lesen*).<sup>46</sup> As we might expect from the previous examples of reading fate and handwriting, this reading is primarily performed by the player's body, what in this case Benjamin calls motor innervation "emancipated" from the interfering (but also present) promptings of rational waking consciousness (*rationalem Wachbewußtsein*).<sup>47</sup> Motor innervation is to be understood not in terms of a discrete subject (i.e., as the communication between a brain and nerves) but rather as a special connection between the player and the table, what Benjamin calls "ein Kontakt telepathischer Art."<sup>48</sup> Crucially, this telepathic contact, which allows the successful or "glücklich" player to divine the winning number, is between him

<sup>45</sup>Edward Burnett Tylor, *The Origins of Culture* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1970) 78–83; he notes, "Arts of divination and games of chance are so similar in principle that the very same instrument passes from one use to the other" (80). Benjamin's other concerns with gambling link it to capitalist thought and particularly modern experience (including time): I do not claim comprehensive coverage of his take on this topic. For Foucault on literature as the last refuge for magic thinking in the modern world, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973) 44.

<sup>46</sup>For card playing, see entry O 13a, 2 in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) 514; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, 640. For "das Brett lesen," Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 297; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 189. More precisely, Benjamin writes "das Brett umsichtig lesen." For the importance of the idea of "umsichtig" to Benjamin's concept of divinatory reading, including the connection to both fate and the future, see the section "Nearness and Distance (Continued)" in "Outline of the Psychophysical Problem," in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 398; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 84. Unfortunately the English translation is more or less useless in this instance.

<sup>47</sup>Walter Benjamin, "Notes on a Theory of Gambling," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 297; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 189. In a different context (to be discussed below), Benjamin refers to the human body as our most ancient and reliable instrument of divination: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 483; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, 142.

<sup>48</sup>"[Tele]pathie," in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 188. Not included in *Selected Writings*.



and the ball—the rolling ball—and not between the player and the croupier who puts the ball in motion: the telepathic/sympathetic link is not with the human world but with that of things, animated moving things.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, just as with the promptings of his own rational consciousness (his own self), the player must fend off or parry the interfering, “feindlichen Suggestionen” generated by his human environment in order to remain open to the communication of the object world and its winning number—or as Benjamin also puts it, to contact with the realm of fate where all the winning numbers already are.<sup>50</sup> In fact, Benjamin supposes that this human world, and more especially his own rational consciousness, is what keeps the realm of winning numbers hidden (*versteckt*) to the player: at the level of sympathetic contact at least, every winning number is known in advance, and it is only when the player proceeds intelligently that he becomes blocked from this advance knowledge.<sup>51</sup>

The distinction that Benjamin insists on between the promptings of consciousness and those of the body (or metonymically, the hand) are familiar to us, both from what we already know from Benjamin—in what he says about reading fate and handwriting, but also more generally what he says about consciousness and trauma, or consciousness and “Erfahrung”—and what we know from ancient divination and the reading practices derived from it.<sup>52</sup> But the distinction is also at the basis of another, less familiar distinction Benjamin draws, one crucial to deciphering his particular take on divination and its relation to the future. He addresses this point not only in his works on gambling, but also in one of his most explicit and extended pieces on divination, the section “Madame Ariane” from *One-Way Street*: both are crucial to his notion of magic reading. In the former, Benjamin claims that when a winning number is clearly predicted (*klar vorhergesehen*)

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>For the “feindlichen Suggestionen,” see *ibid.* For the contact with the realm of fate, see Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 297; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 189. The description of parrying here adumbrates Benjamin’s later accounts of Freud and Baudelaire on trauma, or Erfahrung, and consciousness.

<sup>51</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 297–98; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 189–90.

<sup>52</sup>In extispicy, for example, this is why animal, not human, livers were employed: since animals themselves have no future consciousness—and especially no anticipatory response to impending death or danger—their own conscious expectations would not mark livers in ways that might be mistaken for divine signs. Similarly, birds were used in augury precisely because their animated movements were free of human interference, which made them privileged conduits for the communication of another, invisible realm of divine will and authority—which is also what transformed them into signs. See Collins, “Mapping the Entrails,” and “Reading the Birds.”

but not bet on (*besetzt*), the genuine gambler will recognize that he must stop playing, “for it is a sign that the contact between his motor innervation and ‘fate’ has been interrupted. Only then will ‘what is to come’ [*das Kommende*] enter into his consciousness more or less clearly as what it is.”<sup>53</sup> In the latter, Benjamin declares that “Omens, presentiments, signals pass day and night through our organism like wave impulses. To interpret them or use them: that is the question. The two are irreconcilable. If we fail to [act and so use the omen, then] and only then the message is deciphered. But now it is too late.”<sup>54</sup> In both cases, a particular temporal gap based on a broken physical (albeit invisible) connection has created a distinction within divination itself, one in which both the telepathic reading of signs qua omens and consciously knowing what is to come (the future) are indeed acknowledged as legitimate possibilities, but only in a context in which they are no longer useful or timely.<sup>55</sup>

Against such reading qua fortune-telling, Benjamin poses a form of divination based on what he calls presence of mind, or more precisely, bodily presence of mind (*leibhafte Geistesgegenwart*)—insisting once again on the body as the first, most ancient, and most reliable instrument of divination.<sup>56</sup> Crucially for us, Benjamin still insists that this presence of mind partakes of the future and is, he says, its extract: it still represents an inner intimation of what is to come (*eine innere Kunde vom Kommenden*).<sup>57</sup> It is just, I suspect, that it represents

<sup>53</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 298; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 189. The implication is that “what it is” at that point is “too late”; compare the brief entry in the *Arcades Project*, “Only the future that has not entered as such into his consciousness is parried by the gambler” (*Nur diejenige Zukunft wird vom Spieler pariert, die nicht als solche in sein Bewußtsein drang*), in Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 513 (O 13, 2); *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, 639.

<sup>54</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 483; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, 141. The passage continues, “Each morning the day lies like a fresh shirt on our bed; this incomparably fine, incomparably tightly woven fabric of pure prediction fits us perfectly. The happiness of the next twenty-four hours depends upon our ability, on waking, to pick it up.”

<sup>55</sup>Interestingly enough, he calls this gap a “Schuldgefühl” (*ibid.*).

<sup>56</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 298; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 190; also *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 482, 483; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, 141, 142, which states, “To turn the boding future into a fulfilled ‘now,’ the only desirable telepathic miracle, is a work of bodily presence of mind” (*Die Zukunftsdrohung ins erfüllte Jetzt zu wandeln, dies einzig wünschenswerte telepathische Wunder ist Werk leibhafter Geistesgegenwart*). Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 512-13 (O 12a, 2). Christopher Wild points out to me that “Geistesgegenwart” can also suggest the presence of, even the waiting or watching of, spirit[s], an associational reading very much in keeping with the practice of both Benjamin and his ancient precursors. For the body as “das verlässlichste Instrument der Divination,” Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 483; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, 142.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 482; 141.

a different kind of knowing from that based on (belated) consciousness, and a different kind of “future” from that based on sequential temporality—very much as with the different kind of temporality first broached in “Fate and Character,” one that aims to make this time simultaneous with another (not present).<sup>58</sup>

By (re)introducing the issue of temporality to magic reading—both the idea of futurity and that of the difficult coordination or intersection of two different temporal dimensions—Benjamin also reintroduces the issue of occasionality and, with it, that of happiness as well. He notes that the genuine gambler (*der echte Spieler*) places his most important and usually successful bets at the last possible moment (*im letzten Augenblick*), for “it is only at the last moment, when everything is pressing toward a conclusion, at the critical moment of danger (of missing his chance)” that the ability to “read the table” shows up (*sich einfindet*).<sup>59</sup> This “Zeitmoment,” this sense that there is but one specific instance in which the true signs (the winning number) appear to the player and become legible, unhidden, present, is dependent on two factors: danger (I want to say: hazard) and acceleration.<sup>60</sup> The former, of course, is familiar to readers of Benjamin, adumbrating as it does the more famous formulations of the “Concept of History” essay and recalling that already mentioned in “Fate and Character”: the particular danger that threatens the player lies in the fateful (*schicksalhaft*) category of arriving “too late,” of having “missed the chance”: it speaks to Benjamin’s well-known belief about the historical/temporal conditions for a moment from another time—whether of the past or the messianic/divine—to be grasped in the present, as a present with future force. But the latter factor, acceleration or “Beschleunigung” is less familiar, although just as central to Benjamin’s concept of both gambling and magic reading *per se*. Benjamin says that gambling produces the lightning-quick process of innervation at the moment of danger—a process he will later explicitly compare with the tempo, swiftness, and rapidity of reading (and writing: handwriting)—that

<sup>58</sup>There is a suggestion here that the fall into rational consciousness, which is in some sense a fall from direct connection to things, is also a fall into sequential time—and perhaps, too, into ordinary language: cf. Walter Benjamin, *ibid.*, 483; 142. For the different kind of future from that based on sequential time, see Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 398; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 84.

<sup>59</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 297; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol 6, 189.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 298; 190. For the gambler’s “Zeitmoment,” see also Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 512-13 (O 12a, 2), which addresses as well the issue of acceleration. Cf. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 495; 498-99 (O 2a, 5; O 4a). For hazard (*Hasard*), a term suggestively combining notions of chance, danger, and potential happiness, cf. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 503; 503-04; 509; 510 (O 7a, 5; O 7a, 7; O 10a, 5; O 11, 2).

shuts down or outpaces the processes of rational consciousness and its ordinary, progressive temporality, and so creates the occasion for the unimpeded openness to telepathic contact or sympathetic connection with the non-human object world, its communication, and its other temporality (its other meaning).<sup>61</sup> Acceleration, we might say, inflects the nowness, the occasion of the present moment with a kind of future thrust, and in such a way as to produce the “Grenzfall” in which presence of mind becomes divination—which Benjamin calls one of the highest, rarest moments in life (*in dem Geistesgegenwart zur Divination wird, also einen der höchsten, seltensten Augenblicke des Lebens*).<sup>62</sup> The gambler’s “reading,” then, of this “hidden” (*versteckt*) world of signs, is dependent not only on an open boundary between himself and the non-human world, freed from the promptings of the rational human world, but also on a particular occasion which alone opens up that boundary and provides that freedom—an occasion itself dependent on an accelerated temporality to transform its mere presence into magic divination.

In calling the moment of divinatory reading one of the highest and rarest in life, Benjamin underscores what is at stake for the gambler qua reader: happiness or “Glück.” And in doing so, he returns us not only to one of the defining conditions for magic reading in the ancient world, but also to the question he himself left open in “Fate and Character” and returns to repeatedly in his own work (and not only, but also, in the context of reading). In the earlier essay, Benjamin wondered whether “Glück” had any relation or “Beziehung” to fate, and seemed to suggest that the answer was no: “Glück” was about being fateless, freed from the “Schuldzusammenhang” of the creaturely connection to natural life. Here his answer seems somewhat different, though he retains the same basic terms and does not really abandon his earlier position, either. Here, Benjamin focuses on the “Glück” and “Glücksgefühl” of the successful gambler, whose happiness and fortune are expressions “of being rewarded by fate, of having grasped it, and being embraced by it.”<sup>63</sup> The loser, on the other hand, is someone who has lost his relation or contact with fate, who has (fatefully) missed the chance, the singular occasion for realizing “Glück.” To be

<sup>61</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 298; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 190. For the role of acceleration (Schnelligkeit) in achieving the clairvoyant divination of “das Lesen schlechthin,” see Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” 697–98; 209–10, and “The Mimetic Faculty,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 722; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 231.

<sup>62</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 298; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 190. Cf. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 513 (O 13, 3).

<sup>63</sup>Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 298; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, 190.

sure—and returning more to the language and position of the early essay—Benjamin also stresses that, once the game is over, the loser experiences a sense of release or relief (*Erleichterung*) at having somehow escaped fate, at having lost the connection, whereas the winner is burdened by the peril to which his success and happiness have exposed him at fate's hand.<sup>64</sup> As a sideways glance at Benjamin's writings on the retrospective, divinatory reading of childhood (and later, of history) would show, this failure on the part of the loser and his missed chance can still hold out, in however weak a form, a promise of happiness redeemed, a future fulfillment that can reconcile Benjamin's "irreconcilable" distinctions between immediately acting on omens and reading them belatedly, and so, too, between the fortunes of the winner and loser. But the emphasis here, in the context of gambling as a mode of divination, is certainly on the happiness in the moment itself, in all its power and peril; a happiness derived from divination and tied to a special, singular occasion, which is also to say, a mode of reading derived from the special connection between the player's present and the world of fate, mediated by animated moving things.

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 297; 189.