

EDITED BY GERHARD RICHTER

**Benjamin's Ghosts**

*Interventions in Contemporary Literary  
and Cultural Theory*

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THIRTEEN

## Ornament, Constellation, Flurries

BETTINE MENKE

The graphic line is determined through its opposition to the surface. . . . To the graphic line is assigned, namely, its ground [*Untergrund*]. The graphic line provides its ground with an identity. The identity which the ground of a drawing has is completely other than that of the white surface of the paper on which it is located and which would probably be denied this identity if one were to perceive it as a surging [*Gewoge*] of white wavelengths of color [*Farbwellen*] (possibly indistinguishable with the naked eye).

—BENJAMIN, “Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal”

Because of the *Divan* I was constantly renewing my investigations of oriental characteristics and spent much time in these pursuits; because however handwriting is of such great significance in the Orient, one will hardly find it strange that I devoted myself eagerly to calligraphy without any special linguistic training and attempted both in jest and in seriousness to imitate the oriental manuscripts which lay before me as well as possible and even with some traditional ornamental flourishes. The effect of these intellectual-technical endeavors will not escape the attentive reader upon closer examination of the poetry.

—GOETHE, in a letter concerning his *Western-Eastern Divan*

Discussions of writing always seem to involve models of what it is not as well; writing is modeled oppositionally—either in the familiar opposition between spirit and letter, or in its polarity to the image as representation or reflection. This polarity has been reformulated in terms of arabesque and ornament.<sup>1</sup>

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The term *ornament* offers the classic oppositional concept to the mimetic image. An attempt to derive a concept of writing from a text on similarity must therefore seem quite remarkable. But it is in no way merely a question here of a rehabilitation of a relation of similarity between linguistic sign and referent. Rather, it is a question of the setting or “the configuration in the surface.” The models of writing listed in the title above—ornament, constellation, flurries—bring writing into relation to the surface in which lines, signs, and sketches have their place. In these models, writing is brought into transitional or marginal zones, to points of transition between these models and to the limits of readability in the flurry (*Gestöber*) of letters.

My point of departure is Benjamin’s “Lehre vom Ähnlichen,” since this text elaborates a theory of reading and writing based on the concept of “nonsensory similarity.”<sup>2</sup> The “strange ambiguity of the word reading in relation to both its profane and its magical meaning” (2:208–9), which is often cited in Benjamin criticism, is derived from a precise figure, namely the constellation as a model for writing and the concomitant practices of anagrammatical dispersion.<sup>3</sup>

The “Lehre[n] vom Ähnlichen” sketch out a historical transformation of both the “objects” and the “mimetic faculty, . . . which responds to them” (2:205). If this transformation occurred in a uniform direction, however, it was not due “merely to the growing decrepitude of this mimetic faculty.” While the “metamorphosis” diagnosed by Benjamin can be understood initially in terms of loss: “obvious form [*Gestaltung*], obvious object-character existed once where we are no longer capable today of even suspecting it. For example, in the constellation of stars” (2:206), what has been lost is at the same time itself characterized as a certain readability, as linguistic, as the structurality of the written. Language and writing are accordingly not secondary to a prior magical-unmediated relation; they become rather themselves the primary model of “nonsensory similarity”: “Fundamentally, one must assume that processes in the heavens were imitable by earlier peoples, and moreover both as groups and as individuals: that this imitation contained the concrete instruction to handle [*handhaben*] a certain similarity” (2:206). On the one hand, the term “handle” accentuates an essential constructivity at work in Benjamin’s concept of the “mimetic,” which is not stabilized by (pre)given “similarities,” but rather defined as a “faculty” of the perception

of these similarities through the “processes” of their production (2:204). As the “perception” of the “instruction for handling a certain similarity,” reading “the processes in the sky” is literally determined as a “grasping [*Ergreifen*] of similarity, which is executed in an act of *becoming* similar” (2:956).<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, “imitation” may of course “be an enchanting act; at the same time, however, the imitator disenchant[s] nature, insofar as he brings it closer to language” (2:956). Imitation itself is thus not divorced from language, and reading achieves what imitation has always done.

According to Benjamin’s categorical and fragmentary decree, “perception is reading” and what is “readable” is “what appears in the surface,” namely, “the configuration of the surface” (cf. 5:32). The “handling” of the “processes in the sky” is its reading as constellation. It is not this perception that is lost—the developmental process conceptualized by Benjamin does not describe a substantial loss; rather, it lays claim to another place and another “archive,” “the most perfect archive of nonsensory similarity,” which is to say: “language and writing.”<sup>5</sup>

In his notes to the “Lehre[n] vom Ähnlichen,” Benjamin experimented with situating the “mimetic faculty” in various ways. On the one hand, the “human body” was described as having been the “first material on which the mimetic faculty was tried out.” On the other hand, he experimented with the idea “that the *gaze* was the first motor of the mimetic faculty? That the first effort at mimicry [*Anähnlichung*] is carried out by the gaze? Is it possible to close the circle finally with the supposition that stellar constellations participated in the origin of ornaments? That the ornament fixes *Sternenblicke*” (2:858). This not only refers to views of the stars but also to the gazes of the stars themselves. Benjamin does not answer these questions here. They can serve, however, as clues for how to read the “stellar constellations” in the “Lehre[n] vom Ähnlichen.” For Benjamin, the ornament serves as the place where the two media of the mimetic, the “body” and the “gaze,” intersect. The ornament is not only figure and fixation of the “gazes of the stars” in their constellation; rather, it is “close to dance” as well—proximity being a metonymic relation. Further, “It provides a lesson on the production of similarity” (2:957). The proximity of ornament and dance is that of the prescription and inscription of the dance in the ornament.<sup>6</sup> The dancing body inscribes itself in space in its movements and gestures and leaves behind a trace in or as “ornament.” According to Benjamin, this in its turn is the origi-

nal model, the schema or figure “for the mimetic faculty” (2:958) that traces over it. A phrase of Mallarmé that speaks of dance in terms of its “gestural writing” [*l’écriture de ses gestes*], the writing of its gestures, confirms that these entries in space endure as written traces.<sup>7</sup> The “gesture which produces writing,” according to Roland Barthes, manifests itself as the *Schriftzug*, the trait or the draw of writing, “by letting itself be drawn along” as well.<sup>8</sup> This model of the material traces of writing, of the inscription of gestures, serves Benjamin as the foundation of perception and representation and the concept of *mimesis*, intervening on their behalf: “Man corresponds to every form, to every outline, which he perceives, in the faculty of creating it. The dancing body, the sketching hand recreates [*bildet nach*] and takes possession of him” (4:613). Another note states what is meant by the verb *to correspond* and *to recreate*:

One should thus ask oneself whether the earliest mimesis of objects in the presentation of dance and painting isn’t to a large degree founded on the mimesis of activities [*Verrichtungen*], in which primitive man came in contact with these objects. Stone Age man was perhaps able to sketch an elephant so incomparably because the hand which led the stylus remembered the bow [*Bogen*] with which it killed the animal. (6:127)

Accordingly, the “mimesis of objects,” which is traditionally conceptualized in terms of a binary logic of representation, *is* a “mimesis of activities” [*Verrichtungen*], the latter being a (remembering) relation of relations, of gestures, and not a re-presentation of something pre-given in these activities.<sup>9</sup> Following Benjamin, perception is defined as *reproduction* or presentation, and presentation is defined in its turn as a gestural inscription, a *Schrift-Zug* or trait of writing, which reproduces nothing, re-presents nothing but itself.

When Benjamin’s “mimesis” is modeled on the pattern of the ornament, then the traditional counterterm to all presentation or representation of something, the *a-mimetic* ornament, functions as a “lesson [*Lehrvorgang*] on how to produce similarity.”<sup>10</sup> Benjamin cites thereby Worringer’s well-known, antimimetically inflected opposition between “abstraction and empathy,” or ornament and imitation, and undermines its oppositionality.<sup>11</sup> The drawn line, which reflects nothing (but itself), the *ornament*, alone determines the surface of the presentation. It does not constitute the representa-

tional space within which something (beyond it) is illusorily presented. The gesture is a movement, a reference, not to something that it does not reach, but rather a demarcation in the space it occupies. It is written as a trace in the surface. The gesture relates metonymically to the line that it draws and translates. The line in which the gesture is fixed does not depict; it is not subject to the law of a metaphorical similarity to *something*, rather it sketches out and retraces the gesture. It translates the gesture it produces, and enters into a *metonymical* relation to the surface that it determines and *in* the surface, from trace to trace. Accordingly, Leroi-Gourhan speaks of a nonlinear “coordination of the gestures translated into material, graphic symbols” in their belated—written—“simultaneity” in the surface. The *ornament* is the figured simultaneity of having been inscribed in the surface, which is organized by this inscription.<sup>12</sup>

It is the gesture, the hand inscribing its trace, to which the gaze is related, not the seeing of the representational image of “something,” but rather the *reading* of “configuration” (in) the “surface” (6:32). This points toward an implied affinity between reading and writing, the gaze and stellar-constellations, which are supposed to have participated in the emergence of ornaments. Benjamin’s ornament is the interface between presentation as inscription of gestures (on the one hand) and of the gaze (on the other); thus they are intimately related to the thesis of Leroi-Gourhan who situates writing in the medium of interaction between hand and eye—“in the pairs: reading-face and sketching-hand”—and above all to Derrida’s accentuating continuation of this reading.<sup>13</sup> Where Derrida speaks of writing, Benjamin conceives of the “ornament” on the model of the “constellation,” which demands to be read differently, in a nonlinear fashion. By the same token, the ornament as written, which is here played off against representation (in its stead), determines writing itself as nonlinear organization.

Constellation and ornament provide a reading lesson. Just as the model of mimesis is developed *and* becomes untenable in the ornament conceived as writing, this model of the ornament by the same token gives rise to a non-signifying writing. Writing as the gestic trait, the metonymy of the ductus between hand and feather, “which produces writing by allowing itself to be drawn along,” as Roland Barthes says, without (another) signified, would be a mere exercise in writing or a scribble, whose reading instructions would still have to be given. It would be, in other words, either writing as a sup-

plement to or a remainder, beyond all information, of written characters (*Schriftzeichen*) that have lost their semantic and semiotic functions—of a postcalligraphic ornamentality such as, for instance, the arabesque, which still complies with the rules of ornamental typeface (*Schrift-Bild*).<sup>14</sup> Or it would be the scribble of gestures, which cover the paper, “a confusion, almost a smear, a mess,” as is found in Cy Twombly’s metathematic images of writing—“writing of which only the slant, the cursivity remains . . . : it falls, it rains in a fine spray, it bends like grass, it cancels out from idleness.”<sup>15</sup> The dispersion, which “scatters” its elements over “vast spaces,” “intervals” “thinly sown [and] full of holes,” displays “on a screen (or on paper)” what makes writing possible.<sup>16</sup> Without intervals, there would be no drawings and no signs. These are defined by Benjamin in his early reflections on “Zeichen und Mal” through the organization of the surface in the distinctive and identifying relation of line and ground (2:603). The scriptural gesture can however always approach the “dirtying” [*Verschmutzung*], which sullies this determination, the opposition of line and surface, the condition of possibility of the sign, drawings and writing, black on white.<sup>17</sup> As Barthes suggests, “No surface . . . is virgin: everything is always already raw, rough, uneven, scanned by some incident: there is the grain of the paper, then the stains, the grid-work, the looping, the diagrams, the words.”<sup>18</sup> The scribble of writing—full of holes and dispersed—gives up the distinction (of figure and ground, of the drawn line of the surface) constitutive of all written characters to the dirtying, which it is and from which it cannot distinguish itself as the latter’s ground.

With the model of writing as constellation, Benjamin investigates the organization of writing: black-on-white. That this is not only a question of metaphoricity can be seen in the intensive coalescence of metaphoric/literal reading and metaphoric/literal constellations in Benjamin’s texts: the constellation in the heavens and the text as pre-scriptive for reading stand in for each other in a displacement of metaphoricity and literality.<sup>19</sup> Just as the stellar constellation always already implies reading (to perceive of something *as* a constellation is called reading), the constellation is the *schema* of the reading of literal texts and the model of literal writing. The constellation of stellar points of light in the darkness of night: “The alphabet of stars,” as Mallarmé writes with reference to an old tradition of scripture in the sky, is repeated

in the negative on the white of the paper on which the text is arranged.<sup>20</sup> While the ornament's bond to the gesture accentuates it as manu-scripture, the displacement from ornament to constellation marks writing rather as an operation combining movable letters, thus as a typewriter. As the schema of reading, the *constellation* makes visible the surface marked with writing. It constitutes itself, namely, in the interplay between what is *constellated* and its background, between figure, constellation, and ground. Reading establishes as its *figure* the "constellation," which (according to the principle of the anagram) is bound up with the division and dispersion of elements in the surface (cf. 1:212-13), whose typo-graphic organization is readable as the figure written in the constellation (*Stern-Schrift-Bild*). And conversely, writing "does not fall away like slag while reading," but rather "enters into what is read as the latter's figure" (1:388), as Benjamin puts it in the *Trauerspiel* book, defining thereby the aspect of the "typeface" [*Schriftbild*] of what is written, the typographical organization of its persistence.

Hamann's comment that "the oldest writing was painting and drawing" leads to the thesis that writing "was even then already occupied with the *economy of space, its limitation and determination through figures*."<sup>21</sup> This "economy" that constitutes the ornament as a mode of the written determines script as the "figure" of "limitation and determination" of the surface. Benjamin's discussion in "Zeichen und Mal" of the "sign" as "graphic line" and the surface on which it is found deserves to be cited and read in this context:

The graphic line designates the surface and determines the latter by subordinating itself to it as its ground. Conversely, there is also a graphic line only on this ground, so that here for instance a drawing which would completely cover its ground would stop being one. The ground attains thereby a position which is indispensable for the meaning of the drawing, so that within the graphic two lines can determine their relation to each other only relative to their ground. (2:603)

The readability of signs is determined through their "position," through the positions in which they arrange themselves upon a ground.<sup>22</sup> In the model of the constellation of the stars and of the written characters, the figurality of reading as an (ornamental) arrangement on the surface is related to the ground and is determined through this relation, through what it is not, what is not there, what is not readable.

To accentuate the "economy of space" that constitutes writing and reading somewhat differently, the discussion of readability would have to return to the correspondence between the "gaze" and the "ornament" in "stellar constellations" and investigate the complexity of the formulation cited above, "that the first effort at mimicry [*Anähnlichung*] is carried out by the gaze," "that stellar constellations participated in the origin of ornaments" or "that the ornament fixes stargazes [*Sternblicke*]" (2:858). This formulates a correspondence between the readable and reading, which is also called returning the gaze: "Are there earthly beings as well as things which gaze back from the stars?" that actually open their gaze for the first time in the sky?<sup>23</sup>

The conjunction, according to Benjamin, is "subject to" the "moment" [*Augen-Blick*] (2:207), that of its readability, the *Augen-Blick*, which adjusts and decides on the constellation.<sup>24</sup> In Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, the transitoriness of what is to be read is called the "now of readability" [*Jetzt der Lesbarkeit*] and the "principal" or "critical, dangerous moment which is the foundation of all reading." As a particular readability, the constellation of "stargazes" is a question of time: of the moment (*Augenblick*) and of fixation. The decision on readability, which fixes and thereby excludes (this is its "economy," "limitation and determination"), constructs what is read as a readable figure. Benjamin's concept of "magical reading" as a "reading out of stars, intestines, coincidences" (2:209) draws out its other aspect: "reading out of" is the name of the destructive constructivity of reading.<sup>25</sup> This means that reading, through processes of distinction, division, and dismemberment, decides on the *elements* and the background from which the elements are distinguished and arranges them in the surface which is constituted precisely through reading, in the decision on element and interval.<sup>26</sup> For the constellation, this implies a suspensive interruption in the binding of reading to the *Augenblick*, to the moment and the gaze, which in the act of reading is *captured as* constellation. The break, the caesura, which delimits and fixes what is *momentary*, is readability's condition of possibility.<sup>27</sup> It functions as the distinction of the unreadably undifferentiated and the endless differentiation and as the decision on the constellation, whose readability is its figure. It functions, in other words, as the suspension of time that constitutes the constellation and its figure or image, a suspension that lifts up the latter from its background.

This is how the "ornament" "*captures stargazes*," in Benjamin's terms.



“The images according to which stars are drawn together” remain stiff and staring (*starr und starrend*) in Benjamin’s prose piece “Himmel”:

In a dream I came out of a house and saw the night sky. A wild brilliance radiated from it. For, starry [*ausgestirnt*] as it was, the images according to which stars are drawn together were there in sensory presence. A lion, a virgin, scales and many others *stared down* on the earth as dense clusters of stars. There was no moon in sight. (4:125)

In the homonymic play of the “staring down” [*herunterstarren*] of the images, “stargazes” are made readable as rigidified stares, crystallizations into constellations of stellar characters, into the “read image” [*das gelesene Bild*], which is the name of the interruptive standstill in the *Passagen-Werk* (5:N 3, 1). In its precipitation as con-figuration, reading—in the decision on readability—suspends (other) readabilities. Each readability is determined through the unreadabilities that not only accompany them but also determine them in their exclusion, their “suspension.”<sup>28</sup> When it is a question of the internal relation of readability and unreadability, readings differentiate themselves from each other in the manner in which they realize what must be suspended in each decision on readability. In this way, reading could *read* precisely: the *un-readabilities* accompanying and conditioning each readability, each suspension and each interruption.

The model of the ornament stands for this as well: what becomes readable in the *ornament* is the prescription and inscription of *polysemic* readings.

There is no ornament which cannot be seen from at least two different sides: namely, as surface form or as linear configuration. For the most part however the singular forms, which can be unified in various groups, allow a plurality of configurations. This experience alone points toward one of the most core peculiarities of hash [*crock*]: namely to its irrepressible readiness to derive a plurality of sides, contents and relations from one and the same state of affairs [*Sachverhalt*] for instance a décor or a landscape.<sup>29</sup>

The ornamental structuring or the “figure” cannot be definitively stabilized: the gaze sets up a constellation, reads a certain configuration from out of the texture of lineaments and its interlacings, and each time realizes a new relation of figure and ground. The “polysemy of the ornament” [*Mehrsinnigkeit*

*des Ornaments*] that Benjamin mentions is derived from a specific fabrication of *readability* in specific *groupings* and *unions*; these are decisions on figure and ground. Each bears the possibility of a displacement into another image.

The necessity of decision and the tipping of the decidability of figure and ground are both confirmed by the pictures of Adolf Wölflfi found in his “Negerhall” (1911) (see Fig. 4).<sup>30</sup> In order to see or read anything at all, a decision must be made between the written notation of language, textual and computational systems, catalogs, lists, numbers, interest rates, notes calculations, music, ornaments, maps, and pictures, where decidability is never guaranteed. They play out each respective background as a space of writing and use each respectively blank surface of figuration within a competing system of figuration.<sup>31</sup> The plural, mutually exclusive *views*, “namely, either as surface form or as linear configuration,” reformulate the specific “polysemy” *as* ornament or *as* writing in their mutual dependence as it is staged in all typographical images: figure-poems (see Fig. 5), concettist calligrams (see Fig. 6), Jewish micrographs (see Fig. 7), and arabesques.<sup>32</sup> Arabesque, on the border between ornament and sign, would then name a *gestalt-switch*, an incessant oscillation of undecidable determinations, in which according to Benjamin all ornaments participate.<sup>33</sup> The difference between figure and ground or background, whose erasure would make ornaments, images, and arabesques impossible, is blurred in the undecidability of a *polysemy*, which is due precisely to the fact that decisions must be made constantly and that decisions always already have been made.

The potential displacement of every figure realizes—in absence, as excluded—the readability of the “plurality of sides, contents and relations,” which in reading (or in a state of euphoria that for Benjamin is modeled on reading) can be derived from “one and the same fact [*Sachverhalt*].”<sup>34</sup> Each momentarily established “fact” is only given in a puzzling dis-location—and is thus *dis-placed* in the ornamental setting in which no figure and no image can be stabilized. It is displaced in the Benjaminian “state of similarity,” not that of the “similarity of one with another, with which we are familiar” but rather that in which “what happens never emerges as identical, but rather as similar, inscrutably similar to itself” (2:314).

The ornament is a picture puzzle (*Vexierbild*) and as such is determined in a twofold sense: not only by its diversity of interpretability but also by its “characteristic experience of identity,” which delimits and stabilizes this

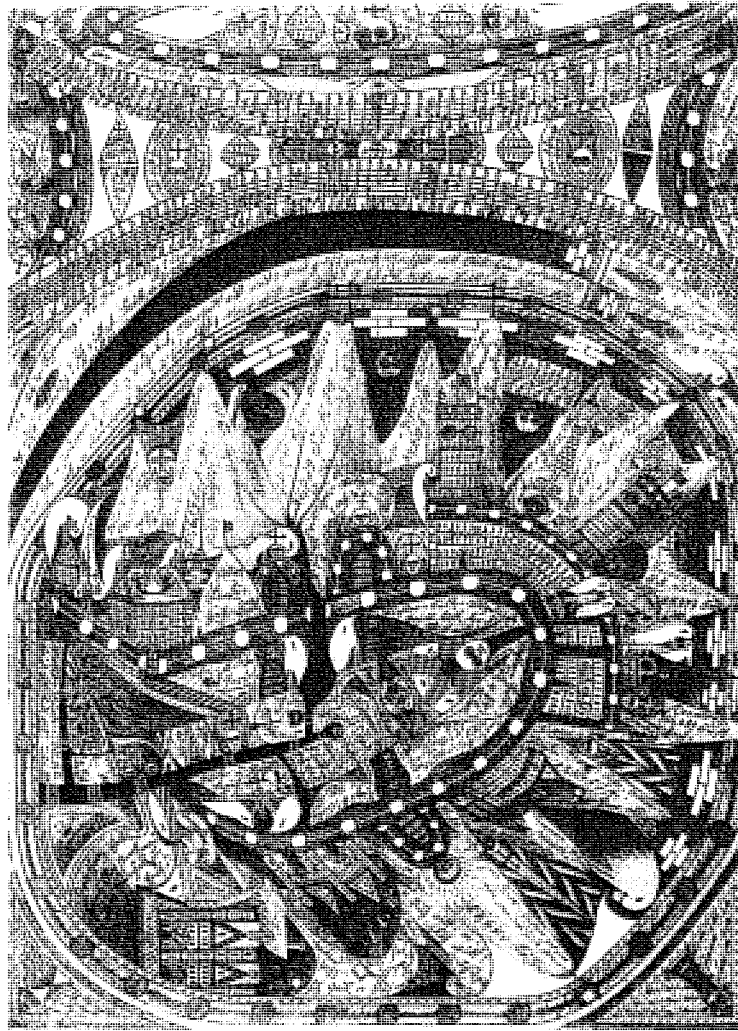


Figure 4. Adolf Wölfli, *Negerhall* (1911). Courtesy the Adolf Wölfli Stiftung, Bern, Switzerland.

D  
ie  
Rech  
tens  
Wage  
soll

Verdiensten und Verbrechen recht Lohn und Straff zu sprechen:

D  
ie er er  
Kunst Tug Un-  
bel- end schult  
ron lohn schon-  
en en en.  
Doch nach Gewinnst  
nit/nach um Günstig;  
desondern einig  
nach Verdienste.

D  
em ie ie  
Recht Last Schul-  
recht er den  
schaff- stra raff-  
en ffen; en.  
Doch nit zu scharf  
noch zu geschwinde:  
nach Billigkeit /  
jedoch gelinde.

Figure 5. German figure-poem.

diversity. This *double* determination constitutes the functioning of the picture puzzle: it oscillates in its “inscrutable similarity to itself” precisely because it switches *between* different stabilizations and in mutually exclusive stabilizations, which is to say *images* (see Fig. 8).<sup>35</sup> Its perception *as* a picture puzzle can only occur in such a gestalt-switch between the realization of polysemy, on the one hand, in which identities are destabilized and dissolve in oscillation, and each respective—figural—stabilization, on the other, which excludes all other stabilizations as *polysemies*. The respective stabilization of an image in a picture puzzle on the background of respectively excluded possibilities must in its turn fall into dissolution, for its respectively *other* image to be stabilized and become visible. The “particular identity” *experienced* in the ornament is that of a readability, realized as a specific (momentary) interruption of the vexations and displacements. The ornament is unstable in the manner of a picture puzzle, insofar as the possibility of the respective image switching into one of the unrealized, excluded unreadabilities announces itself in each of its (respective) visibilities. Benjamin characterizes this permanent oscillation of readabilities in terms of a “quiet turmoil

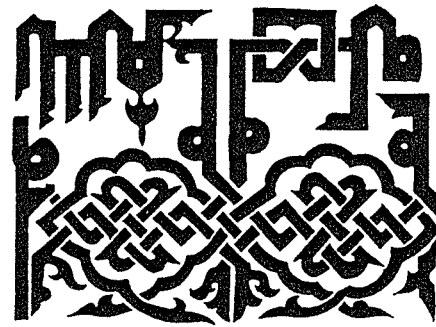


Figure 6. Concettist calligram.

of the ornament" (4:123), exemplified by the Alcazar in Seville, an image of the lion court of Alhambra (see Fig. 9).<sup>36</sup> The edge of its disappearance, its nonvisibility is inscribed within the picture puzzle. It is then always there as a picture puzzle (*Vexierbild*) where it cannot exist as a self-identical image.

As a picture puzzle, the ornament is a model of readability, in the same sense that Benjamin writes of the constellation as a model of reading texts.<sup>37</sup> Benjamin programmatically defines the literal reading of alphabetic script as a *physiognomic* reading of sentences: "Even a sentence becomes . . . a face, not to mention individual words." Physiognomic reading, which (traditionally) inscribed readability, that is, translatable figures in a legend accompanying an illustration, and thus was the model and generator of semantic decidability, implies an organization in and of the surface.<sup>38</sup> Words and sentences, which as a rule are considered to be organized in linear terms although they may have always functioned as typefaces, are wrenched thereby out of their linear sequence. What is then decisive is that "this face [of the sentence] looks like that of the opposed sentence. . . . In this manner, every truth clearly refers to its opposite. . . . Truth becomes a living being; it lives only in the rhythm in which *Satz und Gegensatz*, sentence and opposition, are displaced in order to think themselves" (5:M 1a, 1).<sup>39</sup> Constellative reading performs this *rhythm*—the rhythm with which all readability is determined as "face," as readable constellation by the "opposed sentence," by its relation to "its opposite" into which it is displaced.<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere and in a somewhat different terminology,

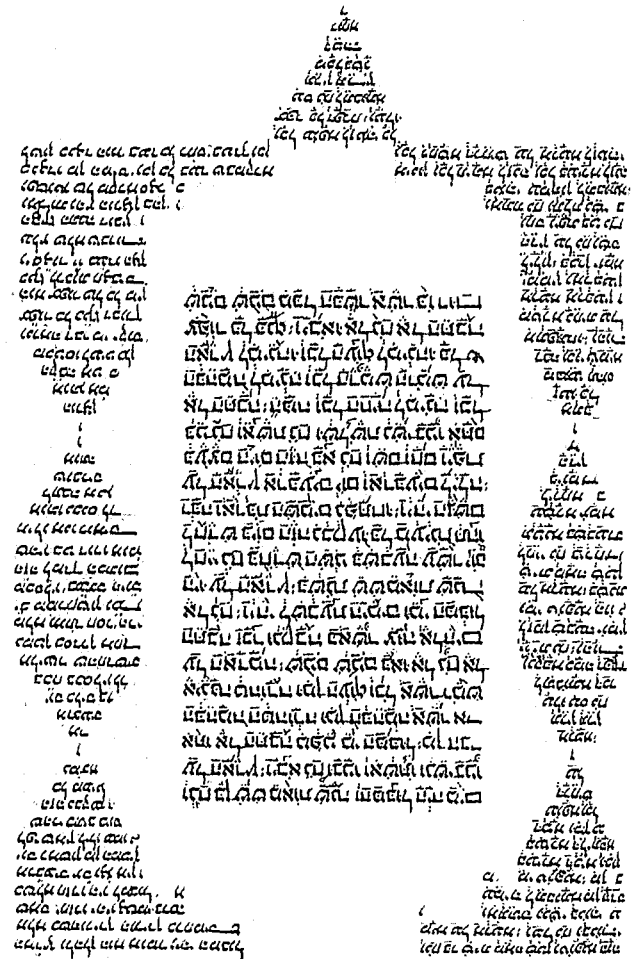


Figure 7. Jewish micrograph (1496).



Figure 8. Nineteenth-century German *Vexierbilder* (picture puzzles).

Benjamin writes that the "truth of a state of affairs [*Sachverhalt*]" not only functions as a constellation but also is "a function of the constellation of the veracity of all remaining state of affairs [*Sachverhalte*]" (6:46). This constellation of the "truth of a fact" does not only become readable in the "opposed sentence" [*Gegen-Satz*], but moreover in the nongiven constellation of all other sentences. The *truth* read in this way is not localizable; it "lives," Benjamin suggests, it takes place in the puzzling reciprocal mediality of "Satz und Gegensatz," *between* the one, the meaning stabilized in the *sentence*, and its other, that which is no longer an identifiable opposite or sentence. In the "realm" of linguistic constellations *between* "Satz und Gegensatz" and their respective stabilizations occurs that which is the object and structure of a different reading whose schema is the constellation: in a rhythm of displacements, in a presence, which is rather an absence, whose model is the picture puzzle (*Vexierbild*), the unreadable constellation of suspended sentences.

The relegation of the constellation to the intervals provides another set of reading instructions. To read "lineless," nonlinear writing, which entails reading (all) writing *as* constellation "with a modified principle of spatial organization," means, as Derrida puts it, "finally reading what wrote itself between the lines in the volumes."<sup>41</sup> If writing has *always* been determined through intervals as in the constellations that emerge in the night sky and organize themselves in the negative on the whiteness of paper, then this implies finally that what is to be read is what cannot be read, but that as such

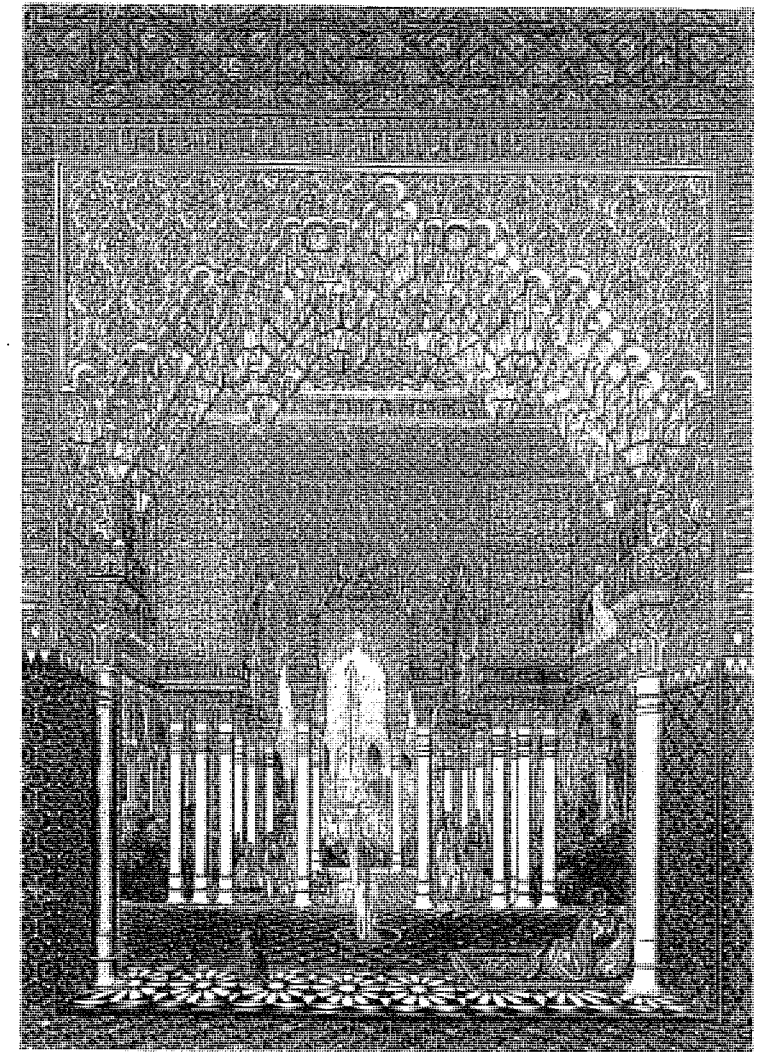


Figure 9. The lion court of Alhambra.

is readability's condition of possibility: the suspended, absent and as such determinate intervals, grounds and backgrounds. Reading is devoted to dispersion to the extent that it perceives (which is to say, reads) the nonfinal functioning of the text and realizes it *as constellation*, as ordered arrangement in the space in which the elements are dispersed. In their suspended, blank, and unread interrelations, however, these dispersed elements are read *differently*.<sup>42</sup> Reading dislocates words out of the supposed self-identity of their meaning into the unresolvable puzzle of *self-similarity*.

Rather than givens, what is at stake are the relations and structures, bracings, "Verspannungen," (2:208, 212) and intervals that determine that which appears as given: the tension and the distance between writing and image, typeface (*Schriftbild*) and signified, between drawing and scribbling—and the self-distance, which enters into every text and every word; it disturbs and scatters the word into letters.<sup>43</sup>

I want to account for this by turning to another Benjaminian model of the materiality of script as "flurries" [*Gestöber*], which occur as the pulsing of the rhythm in which language constructs and withdraws meaning, insofar as every *something*, every figure remains bound to the (absently) determinant relations, as the *margin* of the constellation, as the—cloudy—border-zone of itself inscribed within the constellation. In the pulsing of the constellation organized by unreadable intervals, in the rhythm with which a figure, on the one hand, constructs itself as surface-figure or constellation and, on the other hand, returns to the surface, the ground, before which it lifts itself, the constellation is unreadably distorted into flurries. This *flurry of letters* comes from the Benjaminian repertoire of metaphorical models. It surrounds childhood reading like a storm of soundless *snow flurries*, out of which both the reader and the read emerge only to be driven about and to lose themselves within it. A "loosely woven world [*undichte Welt*]"<sup>44</sup> in which everything is displaced with each step," is given in the pages of books combining pictures and letters for *that* reading in which words appear in a masquerade ball whose director is precisely not "meaning": they "*whirl around* [as] *resounding snowflakes*" (4:609).<sup>45</sup> The "looseness and flakiness [*Lockere und Flockige*], which cloud up in the core of things like snow flurries in a small glass ball" are found in the word "Mummerehlen," dislocated into misunderstanding. The phrase "clouds itself" becomes disfigured in its interior—"Mummerehlen,"

paronymically displaced between *Mummen* (mummery), *Mummelsee* (Mummel Lake), and the *Murmeln* (murmur) of words. These words direct anyone searching for their referent into that cloud of "flakiness" and "looseness," where words lose their contours and images cannot be resolved. Rather than being transgressed by the act of seizing the signified in an illusory referentiality, the "deceptive screen of the surface" (4:609) becomes loosened and destabilized in the "clouds" [*im Gewölke*] that detach words from their referents. Signs, signifiers, and signifieds lose themselves in the flurry of letters, words, and hieroglyph swirling disruptively through the pages. The clouds comprise a zone of the dis-solution or "loosening" of the identical, of self-contained images, into the "flakiness" [*Flockige*], which is opened out by language in the misunderstanding and dislocation of words—into the other similarity (with itself) that does not close onto itself, a space of noises, of unlocalized movements, oscillations, of mixing and flowing together.<sup>46</sup>

In the dispersion of writing in the "flurry [*Gestöber*] of changeable, colorful and quarrelling letters" (4:103) and in the *new* typographical "*invasion of letters*" (5:F, 22) diagnosed by Benjamin, writing is realized as what it has always been: the materiality of black-on-white before and after the readability of meaning, a *pulsing surface*, in which the restriction of writing's commitment to the signified is dissolved. In the textual surface of flurrying dispersion, writing is abandoned to its law of black-on-white just as the latter in its pulsations loses itself again in the oscillations of visibilities/readabilities.<sup>47</sup> The "flurry" of "letters" designates the organization in the surface as an endless oscillation of black-on-white, and hence its undemarcated boundary, a *border-zone* for all readability and textuality always already inscribed in writing.

The materiality of writing, black-on-white, realizes itself and loses itself in *flurries*—as it does in the dirtying *smear* in which gestural inscriptions and intervals approximate each other and collaborate. In their undecidability between sign and interval, they pass over into oscillations, into a *surging* (*Gewoge*) in which the scribble and the white surface of the blank page, a "*surging* (of indistinguishable) wavelengths" (2:603), become inseparable.

*Translated by Anthony Reynolds*