InTensions

Reading Reading
in Benjamin's "Little History of Photography"

Shepherd Steiner
University of Florida

Abstract

The essay focuses on the problem of reading in Walter Benjamin's "Little History of Photography," with the ultimate aim of reading reading. To do so the essay places specific pressure on the notions of 'aura' and 'allegory,' two well-known themes in Benjamin scholarship that are instanced by Benjamin in this text in an especially crisp and particular way. As a corrective to a 'postmodern' theory of the sign and the championing of allegory specifically, the essay argues for the inseparability of the tropes and the risks of hypostatizing one at the cost of the other. Through a close reading of the narrative itself – a history that moves from the photography of D. O. Hill, to Eugene Atget, and finally August Sander – the author maps out a chiasmic structure that organizes Benjamin's text as a movement from looking to reading. It is argued that this movement doubles for a shift between caricatured interpretations of symbol and allegory, that Benjamin's narration is quite careful to mark in order to stage a far more inscrutable notion of allegory as reading. Further, by picking up on a few key themes and significant moments of literal translation between German, French and English the essay argues for a link between Benjamin's narration of the history of photography and his autobiographical writing; questions impacted by a recurrent interest in the problems of singularity, paranomasis and translation.

*The illiteracy of the future,' someone has said, will be
ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography.*
-Walter Benjamin

A title that stutters does not auger well, but then the deeply counter-intuitive work of Walter Benjamin puts logic and language under considerable strain. The case of Benjamin's "Little History of Photography" (1931) is exemplary. The text begs for an especially generous analyst: a reader both sensitive to its many peculiarities and open to its varied ticks and idiosyncrasies, something that urgently demands a note on method. In this exemplary case, we advocate a flexible and variable mode of close reading. Primarily because, when it comes to afflicted aesthetics, literal questions—literal and hence practical as well naïve questions of reading—are the best place to begin.

[2]   The first that strikes the reader of Benjamin's text is why would he write a "*Little* History of Photography? Is it a symptom? Why *little* when questions as large as the "illiteracy of the future" are posed? Why "*Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*"? For a number of crucial reasons: firstly, because the history Benjamin writes is a short, reduced or condensed history. Perhaps more importantly, because Benjamin's comments on the history of photography are punctuated throughout by an almost anecdotal recourse to individual photographs, and more specifically to singular portraits. Master narratives are no longer a possibility for Benjamin. He is a close reader of images and part of the littleness of his project results from the fact that his reading can only latch onto and jump between specific moments in the history of the medium. Even in the face of the larger genetic history he narrates and that links the photographs of his three main examples in succession – David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, Eugene Atget and August Sander – the careful reader cannot be but jolted by the spectacle of non-coherence that seems to pose

dissimilarity and exemplarity on an at least equal footing. Further, what he pulls out of his singular examples evolves more or less upon particular details, or instances of micro reading.

[3]   To mention only three instances, there is the central passage on aura:

> Hill's *Newhaven Fishwife*, her eyes cast down in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographers art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there (Benjamin, *Little History* 510).

There are his comments on the picture of Dauthendey the photographer, the father of the poet:

> …from the time of his engagement to that woman whom he found one day, shortly after the birth of her sixth child, lying in the bedroom of his Moscow home with her veins slashed. Here she can be seen with him. He seems to be holding her, but her gaze passes him by… No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search …for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of the long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may discover it (Benjamin, *LH* 510).

Finally, there is his famous description of the "optical unconscious" where he speaks to the anthropomorphic enlargements of Karl Blossfeldt, writing:

> Details of structure, cellular tissue, with which technology and medicine are normally concerned—all this is, in its origins, more native to the camera… Yet at the same time, photography reveals in this material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things…Thus Blossfeldt with his astonishing plant photographs reveals the forms of ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop's crosier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller's thistle (*LH* 512).

[4]   It is a "Little History of Photography" then, firstly because Benjamin is a literal reader of specific photographs or singular examples. No doubt, this should be related to Richard Wolin's remarks on Benjamin's "childhood recollections" (1). Wolin describes these recollections as "a series of snapshots-in-prose," and relates the montage-like effect achieved to Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image (*Walter Benjamin* 2). Wolin quotes Benjamin from "A Berlin Chronicle" saying "autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life…I am talking of space, of moments and discontinuities"(*WB* 2). In a nutshell, history for Benjamin can no longer be conceived of as a healthy flow of events over time; instead, it limps along as a periodic and discontinuous series of events, or more succinctly catastrophes, ailments and symptoms.

[5]   Secondly, given that Benjamin is a dialectical thinker, littleness is important because the little is opposed to the big or absolutely large—what Kant calls *die Größe* or "the sublime." [i] Without dipping into the extensive supplementary literature that argues for Benjamin's debt to Kant, we can simply isolate one passage in order to mark that debt. For example, Benjamin writes, "mechanical reproduction is a technique of diminution that helps people to achieve control over works—a control without whose aid they could no longer be used" (*LH* 523). In effect, Benjamin is arguing that photography domesticates or miniaturizes the absolutely large or ungraspable—a point he drives home especially with regard to the photography of art. In this sense, downsizing renders the sublime manageable, or more succinctly, apparently makes it legible or readable. Littleness is important then, because the diminutive size and scaling of photography opens up the problem of the empowerment of the subject that is a condition of largeness relative to the smallness of the photograph. This would have been important to Benjamin's politics in the broader context of the 1930s and the ever-worsening climate of

fascism. But the relationship between empowerment (largeness) and disempowerment (littleness) is complex. It is tempting to understand this relationship as dialectical, for it suggests that what gain in "control" is achieved "through mechanical reproduction" is part and parcel of a corresponding loss; dialectics in this context being an economy of loss and gain (*LH* 523). However, Benjamin's move is more extreme as we will see. In fact, the relationship is aporetic, or to use Benjamin's preferred designation from his book *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, antinomic.

[6]   This tension between control and loss of control, as well as the corresponding set of problems put in motion for both the subject—whose identity is now put under question and impacted by mystification, fiction and dream on the one hand, and the object on the other, whose diminution and capture open up to the largeness of unforeseen horizons and beyond—stages a number of opportunities for reading. Once again we take literal reading on the most naïve and practical level as our guide; Kant's "sublime" offers one horizon. Putting the magnifying glass to Benjamin's text as it were, we now train it specifically on the word *klein* or *kleine*. Our hunch is that further details will be brought into focus, details that make the literal word, *kleine* or little, into a very strange, very large thing. In fact, the closeness of our reading unsettles what control over words we normally exercise as readers and opens up to a literal dimension of language rarely contemplated.

[7]   So what about the adjective little or *kleine*? Well, the phoneme 'kl' is important. In an extraordinary essay titled "The Word *Wolke*— If it is One," Werner Hamacher tells us that in the context of Benjamin's autobiographical writing we need to be attentive to the letters "lk" in *Wolke* and their reversal as "kl" in *Kleptomanin* (141-143). He singles out a section of *Berlin Childhood Nineteen Hundred* entitled "A Specter"—a section treating "the coincidence of a

dream and an event of waking life" (136), concerning the retelling of one of Benjamin's dreams in which he sees a ghost. Hamacher quotes Benjamin:

> Yet how much more gloomy [than the horror that the skull and cross-bones introduces into Robinson Crusoe] was the terror that came from the woman in white garments who wandered through a gallery with open eyes, yet still asleep, carrying a lighted candelabra. The woman was a kleptomaniac *(Kleptomanin)*. And this word, in which a bleak and evil first tonal clang distorted the two already ghostly syllables "*manin,*" as Hokusai made a death face into a ghost through a few strokes of a pen –this word petrified me with horror (142).

Given that the word *kleine* begins with the same "bleak and evil first tonal clang" (142) as *Kleptomanin*, it should be considered similarly petrifying. More so, if one hears within it yet another phonetic point raised by Hamacher, a sort of distant relative of *manin*, the shutter or ghostly after image of *eine* —call it another forgotten one in the ancestral family tree that should also include the Latin *manes*, or the souls of deceased loved ones (142). From the very instant of pronouncing the first word of Benjamin's title then, "kl" takes us via the click of a shutter or a shot, to death and Benjamin's favorite image of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, the death's head. Hamacher reminds us that to pronounce the consonants "kl," the reader has in fact to show his or her teeth in a deathly grimace (142).

[8] The death knell that sounds within the consonants "kl," and thus in the word *klein* or *kleine,* does not auger well! Our most basic presuppositions about what a text is and what it means, are already being placed under considerable strain. More complexities follow, and in more ways than one the "Little History of Photography" that Benjamin narrates emerges out of the silence that is death. If any of Benjamin's contemplations on the aesthetic (*symbolon*) can be called afflicted it is this little, death-obsessed history of photography where our understanding is so troubled by the first syllable

uttered, so distressed by Benjamin's own hunting back of the problem of language to the level of the letter, that the wholeness and consistency of the text itself as well as the words within it simply fall to pieces.

[9]   Before turning to the logic of Benjamin's narrative—the way it literally condenses his interest in littleness as a problem of translation, repetition, death, and photography itself as a language—let me tease out the main thrust of Hamacher's reading that concerns the originality of the word. Spelling out Benjamin's explicit interest in the sounds "kl" and "rt," their reversal into "lk" and "tr," as well as their substitution by means of which "kl" can become "rt" brings into focus what Benjamin calls in his essay "The Task of the Translator," "*reine Sprache*" or pure language (253-263). Carol Jacob makes this point far more crisply in "The Monstrosity of Translation": she describes Benjamin's concern for the "originariness" of language in terms of the writer's commitment to "literality" [*Wörtlichkeit*] that we can also call the "linguistic event" (Paul de Man), "the passion for the real" (Alain Badiou), or "modernism" (T. J. Clark).[ii] In any case, Hamacher tells us that cases of paranomasis, or words that are derived from the same root as another word, are of great interest to Benjamin; that Benjamin is someone interested in the mimetic logic of words, i.e. how words sound, how those sounds are made, and what that repressed history of the word reveals. The key texts Hamacher mentions are Benjamin's "Doctrine of Likeness" and "On the Mimetic Capacity of Words" (144). In this sense, when we pronounce the "kl" of *kleine*, we might not only listen for the onomatopoeic click of a shutter or gun, but also for its relation through mirroring to the sound of "lk" in the word *Wolke* or cloud, and further something linking these two otherwise different words, a correspondence that Hamacher's essay begins to map out, and which is a well known trap for the writer who wishes to be absolutely modern and who recognizes the impossibility of that impulse. Without jumping too far ahead of ourselves, we

can key in upon what Hamacher singles out as the exemplary case of paranomasis in Benjamin, wherein the German word *Wolke* comes to resemble through a substitution afforded by paranomasis, the German word for words, "*Worte*" (133). In effect, Hamacher argues that the word *Wolke,* and the web of metonymic associations it holds for Benjamin, has an important purchase on the writer's theory of language and what he conceives of as "the task of the translator" (139). As a writer, and especially translator, Benjamin not only toys with paranomasis, but worries over it.

[10] We might rightly wonder what possible theory of language hinges on clouds, no less than the substitution of *Wolke* for *Worte* (i.e. clouds for words). Finally, what kind of translation that is at all useful as a translation, is word for word or literal? An answer—which will of necessity be situational, and hence only rooted in the singular text under scrutiny—will allow us to extend Hamacher's thesis on the centrality of the word *Wolke,* within the German language, to problems of translation and paranomasis between German, French and English. After all, the English word for cloud reverses the key letters or sounds in *Wolke*, in complete accordance with the idiosyncratic logic of Benjamin's paranomasis that Hamacher traces. That a synonym for the word *Wolke* holds a pole position in the "Little History of Photography" and that by the end of the essay this comes to resemble, through the substitution afforded by paranomasis, the German word for words or *Worte* suggests we might extend Hamacher's insight into Benjamin's autobiographical texts to his theoretical and expository work on language and photography itself.

[11] To what end? Ultimately, not only to understand photography as a language, but as a language of translation that hinges on the literalization of figures, objects and things in the everyday historical world. Thus, as readers of Benjamin's essay, we move from photographs that resemble clouds and that

form a constellation of images around which Benjamin discusses his key notion of aura to photographs that are like words, and which form a second constellation of images around which he discusses his no less important notion of allegory. In fact, the essay tracks a movement from looking to reading photographs, with the added complication at the end of the essay being that one also requires the capacity to read reading. We might call this a point at which the fiction of control, or the problem of downsizing, that renders the sublime manageable, or more succinctly legible or readable, comes back into focus with all the force of the Kantian sublime. In effect, Benjamin conceives of the aesthetic as a category that underwrites logic, system or dialectics, and which is retrievable only after the fact, through a retrospective glance. Thus, in a series of speculative questions in the final paragraph concerning "the lessons inherent in the authenticity of photographs," lessons "even Baudelaire failed to grasp," Benjamin writes:

> This is where *inscription* must come into play, which includes the photography of the literarization of the conditions of life, and without which all photographic construction must remain arrested in the approximate … isn't every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit? Isn't it the task (A*ufgabe*) of the photographer—descendant of the augers and haruspices—to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures? 'The *illiteracy* of the future,' someone has said, 'will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography.' But shouldn't a photographer who cannot *read* his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate? Won't *inscription* become the most important part of the photograph? (*LH* 527)

[12] With the problem of reading now *marked* on both the micro-textual level and as an overall trajectory on the global level, we can ask the question, what kind of condensing or editing down of the history of photography Benjamin is making in the shift he tracks? Essentially, ninety years of photographic history is condensed into three moves. From its beginnings in Hill and Adamson we move to Eugene Atget—a middle point—and finally to August Sander. Not only

do we traverse three countries (Great Britain, France and Germany), but there is a sense that we are to realize this capsule history as a movement from the full light of day required by Hill and Adamson,[iii] to the half-light of Atget's always vacant and often foggy and ill-lit pictures, onto Sander's pictures, which following the proceeding logic would presumably be photographs taken under the conditions of darkest night. In effect, the history of photography that Benjamin narrates moves like the path of the sun from East to West in Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*—surely an intended reference—with, of course, the difference being that Benjamin's sun moves in the opposite direction. Undoubtedly this movement tracks technical advancements in photography, but just as surely the effect registers photography's dependence on light and hence its sobering (i.e., troublingly literalizing) relation to philosophical tradition. In any case, just as in Hegel, where the art of the Egyptians is surpassed by the classical art of the Greeks, which leads to Romanticism, in Benjamin's history Hill and Adamson's work, which provides reason to mention hieroglyphics, is supplanted by the work of Atget, which leaves the art of Sander. The movement of photography Benjamin tracks here, a movement from an art of the sign to the high moment of the symbol, only to reach an anti-climactic post-art of the all too readable sign—too spiritualized because once removed from the symbol's "sensuous form"—holds up the work of Atget where the symbol brought into shape is empty and a nothing.

[13] To narrate Benjamin's history of photography once again, we move from pictures that one looks into, ultimately to pictures that one reads; and onto a future in which Benjamin foretells that because the photograph is unreadable we will need captions. In effect, his essay itself tracks a movement from looking to reading; from looking into the cloudy surfaces of Hill and Adamson's graveyard pictures, to reading the portraits of August Sander. In this binary mapping of the essay, the work of Eugene Atget occupies some kind of half-

way mark where one cannot be certain if one is looking or reading. We might preliminarily pose the question of Atget's work thusly: since one often sees clouds in Atget's very empty or people-less, early morning photographs—and in the case of his famous pictures of St. Cloud one actually reads the word "cloud" in the title—does this necessitate a kind of looking that also reads? Further, given Benjamin's fixation on portraiture and his interest in and worry over paranomasis should one read absent crowds into these clouds? The easy substitution of "clouds" for "crowds," at least in English, may warrant it. But so too does the specter of Sander's portfolio of the German *Volk*, which it might be added, sounds suspiciously like clouds or *Wolke* in German, thus presenting the literal-minded translator with a next step. If only more histories of photography were as compellingly afflicted as this!

[14] If we return to the first sentence of Benjamin's essay, we can recuperate the thread of his argument that operates both metaphorically and metonymically. The German word *kleine* that marks the title with a click drifts very quickly into the neighborhood of clouds. Thus, with "The fog that surrounds the beginnings of photography is not quite as thick as that which shrouds the early days of printing," we are rather dramatically plunged into the thick of looking (*LH* 507). Though fog is not cloud, nor ever as thick as cloud, the relationship between clouds and the "fog that surrounds the beginnings of photography" (*LH* 507) should be noted. They are, we might say, as thick as thieves! After all, even the haze or smoke from a hashish pipe holds a special metonymic significance in Benjamin's corpus. As a set of images, smoke, cloud, haze, and fog, relate to Benjamin's interest in colportage effects and the two-foldness of allegory. Thus Hamacher tells us—with perhaps too much emphasis on the easy transition into phenomenological depth—that "*Wolke* designates an intention toward language," which suggests at least three things for our purposes (133). First, that photography is a language for Benjamin;

second, that it is a language which is initially mixed up in the image; and third, given Benjamin's retrospective, allegorical glance, that language as such exists within and beyond any meaningful horizon that the photographic image brings into representation. Benjamin will in fact, go on to stamp out the difference between image and text, and the way he will do it hinges on the word *Wolke*, how one emerges from its mimetic truth and makes one's way to language. Because cloud belongs in Benjamin's texts to those who are determined to move into the depths of language—i.e., toward the word and letter, or else the etymological root of "pure language" that the different pronunciations of "rt" or "lk" of *Worte* and *Wolke* deny—it seems that if we are initially in the thick of *clouds* the viewer will ultimately get close to language and become a reader.

[15] The point here is that willingly entering into a fog bank is a warning about interpretation. Though Benjamin thinks that getting lost in clouds can stage a productive encounter with the language of photography, it is clear that things can go awry. In fact, reading does go astray in Benjamin's text: it bifurcates into two branches. One dominant branch, believing to have completely shaken off the fog, gains a clear perspective on photography. The other becomes a feeder and sinks into the abyss of language. Thus, the essay tracks a movement of enlightenment that moves from the obscurity of looking into something like clouds, to the clarity of reading something like words. Theoretically, we move from concentrating on the symbolic problematic of aura in Hill and Adamson's "anonymous" and "un-posed" study of the *Newhaven Fishwife,* 1845, to the half-light of Atget's *St. Cloud, Matin, 6 h 30, juillet,* 1921, onto the apparently allegorical reading of Sander's portraits. The grand narrative sketched out here is a fable of consciousness-raising, for it seems mass society may find the means of its politicization in the reading of images or faces. Curiously, however, this opening of one's eyes to reading has something else mapped over top of it. For instance, awakening is a function of

the increasingly dark historical cloud with which fascism obscures the sun. In effect, the gain in the clarity of reading becomes entangled in an economy of loss that is bound up in the enfeeblement of the subject under the mounting hegemony of the German Right. In this sense the politicization of the aesthetic that Benjamin is well-known for tracking—that he in fact plots out in microcosm as the history of photography from the 1830s to the 1930s—is complicated by a counter narrative involving his equally famous statement concerning the "aestheticization of politics." The narrative toward enlightenment is countered by fascism's ability to turn the proletariat into sleep-walkers. Apparently night comes to those who find truth in hand through the kind of reading offered by Sander's photographs or as much by virtue of photographic captions.

[16] That narrative and counter narrative are pitted against one another should not undermine our confidence in the efficacy of either one of Benjamin's narratives or his political commitments. Instead, he seems to find some possibility in this *aporia*, wherein two historical truths confront one another equally. Thus the emptiness Benjamin champions in Atget's photographs: "Empty is the *Porte d'Arcueil* by the fortifications, empty are the triumphal steps, empty are the courtyards, empty, as it should be, is the *Place du Tertre.* They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant" (*LH* 519). And finally to make his point: "It is in these achievements that Surrealist photography sets the scene for a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings. It gives free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail" (*LH* 518), what Benjamin elsewhere calls "anthropological materialism," and here names "free play" (*LH* 519)—something involving a kind of selfish dialectic that is self-absorbed—"whose clichés merely establish verbal associations in the viewer"

(*LH* 527)—remains as potentially politically explosive as it ever was. Providing of course, we do not equate this "free play" with simple projection on the photography by the viewer, and that it is centered on the detail, where Benjamin finds the trace of an "optical unconscious" (*LH* 512). In effect, Benjamin suggests in these passages that we must look away from the intended subject-matter which confronts us—that buys into the mystification of the portrait, the city, and its spaces in any case—and find distraction instead in the detail. In contrast, to the aura of early photographs and the economy of desire animated between the viewer and the likes of the *Newhaven Fishwife*— that is posed in the present tense—the positive moment of self-hood established in surrealist photography is through a retrospective glance. The larger point about aura being, that if our response to early portraiture operates under the fiction that a dialogue between the subject and object is possible in real time, with the re-occurrence of aura in turn-of-the-century portraiture—a kind of aura that was manufactured by portraitists—not even an attentive interpreter like Benjamin can help turn away in embarrassment.

[17] All of this suggests that Benjamin's essay is rather more tightly structured than the superficial historical narrative it recounts seems to posit. How can we describe the tension Benjamin engineers between seeing and reading, or between historical progress and the processes in which history comes to nothing? First, we can say that Benjamin's essay is not simply structured by a mirror reversal. If it was then, if one loses oneself in clouds, one should move in an orderly fashion and through a transitional stage to the enlightenment that comes with reading words. By the end of the text one can read, but only insofar as one does so under a dark light, and insofar as reading is two things. In this sense the process of enlightenment, here organized under the controlling metaphor of progress achieved in face of the image, a kind of culture-wide *Bildungsroman* is systematically peeling in two: off the top of the

image exfoliates a skin of captions and faces to be read as social types, while from within the interior of the image "pure language" invaginates. This crucial complication, a narrative string with an in folding imperative needs to be recuperated in face of the triumphant narrative of self and progress that is all to easily grasped. In effect, each narrative sheath or plane of reading is in dissociable from the other, because sharing the same image as (mnemotechnic) support, yet each is separate. If "aura is the unique appearance or appearing of a distance, no matter how close it may be" (*LH* 518), then reading is the appearance or appearing of a closeness no matter how far away it may be; something which doubles as a handy enough schematization of the problem of reading's bifurcation by the end of the essay. What's more, this if/then structure is a chiasmic equation that will have repercussions for Benjamin's politics, which are neither wholly pessimistic nor optimistic, nor really rooted in the present at all. The strange shifts in tense and the retrospective and projective glances throughout the essay are only the tip of the iceberg here. What is at stake is neither past-ness nor futurity. In other words, we do not see here the scaffolding of what Gershom Scholem called Benjamin's messianic politics, in which future possibility is gleaned in the present from the past (193). With the plane of photography operating as a medium of translation between exfoliating and invaginating languages, the "dimension of futurity" is inaccessible.[iv]

[18] Given this chiasmic structure one might frame the problem of Benjamin's politics in terms of the theft of possibility from the present; with the further complication that possibility neither wholly resides in the past (which would be nostalgia in any case), nor in the prospects of a future (which would still be locked into Scholem's kind of dialectical or theological machine). Some little confirmation of this is provided by the two paranomic book ends of Benjamin's essay *Wolke* and *Worte*, along with the shifting set of signifiers that links these

paranomatic markers to looking and reading. Up until now, we have been dealing with the words *Wolke* and *Worte* on the level of subject-matter, and as examples of paranomasis with the consonants "lk" and "rt" separating them, but there is also something that connects *Wolke* and *Worte* that cannot be seen but only heard: that is the consonant sound, "vo" (where? or *wo*? in German) and its elongation and translation into the French, "*vol*" or theft. In this register the essay marks a path from one kind of theft to another: the economy of loss and gain at either end of the spectrum implicating the misplacement of reading in face of looking and conversely the misplacement of looking in face of reading. In this sense, both the concentration on aura in the passages concerning the *Newhaven Fishwife* and the equally concentrated interpretation of Sander's portraits as synecdoches for a larger social order are examples of caricatured, reduced and mystified notions of symbol and allegory, respectively. The aesthetic lineage of the symbol and its demise at the hands of Enlightenment allegory is marked in both cases. The recourse to a poetic meter in his two definitions of aura—one quoting lines from Stephan George beginning "And I ask: how did the beauty of that hair…(*LH* 510), the other the musings perhaps of a thinker "…while at rest on a summer's day" (518)—contrasts with the scientific discourses brought on stage to discuss Sander's social portraiture (520). The traps are clear: Benjamin has set them for himself and has willingly fallen victim to both. The point being that he has adopts the rhetorical register particular to both, and thus ever so quietly tickles each tradition in order to pose something other. Feeling around for another dimension or measure of theft – significantly larger than what the law designates as "grand larceny," for surely the economy of loss and gain put into play by the dialectic is not petty, but in fact, "grand larceny" to begin with – and knowing where to look for it, becomes a peculiarly reader task.

[19] Which brings us to the chiasm or crossing >< itself. If things are dialectical at both ends of the essay, it is more difficult to make out what happens at the crosshairs >< of Benjamin's "Little History of Photography." Do the consonant sounds "vo" or "*vol*" have any purchase on this crossing? We should hesitate to call it either a place or a time, for it is indeed, subject to theft of another order. How might we precede in this final analysis? We can take our lead from Atget, the photographer Benjamin showcases at the crossing. "It is no accident that Atget's photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene" (*LH* 527). We can begin with the curious image and comparison Benjamin uses to preface his discussion. He writes:

> …what is decisive in these photographs is always the relationship of the photographer to his technique. Camille Recht indicated as much in a nice image. 'The violinist,' he wrote, 'must form the tone himself, must seek it, find it quick as lightning; the pianist strikes the key: the tone resounds. An instrument is at the disposal of the painter as well as the photographer. Drawing and coloring, for the painter, correspond to the violinist's production of sound; the photographer, like the pianist, has the advantage of a mechanical device that is subject to restrictive laws, while the violinist is under no such restraint. No Paderewski will ever reap the fame, ever cast the almost fabulous spell, that Paganini did.' There is, however—to continue the metaphor—a Busoni of photography, and that is Atget (*LH* 518).

That the discussion of Atget is prefaced by a discussion of music and specifically the violin—a word that Benjamin elsewhere strings out (plays) to establish correspondences with violence, violation, and of course, theft (*vol*), with the figure of the *Kleptomanin* along for good measure and all compacted into a section of *Berlin Childhood Nineteen Hundred* as a figure of reading— should put us on our guard that objective interpretation is far behind us and that what we face in the figure of the photographer as pianist is the performance of a far more complex and subterranean notion of reading. It is this supplementary figure of reading that will lodge itself deep within the withered category of reading which later surfaces in the work of Sander.

Reading what though, and reading how? Reading reading, "where inscription must come into play, which includes the literarization of the conditions of life, and without which all photographic construction must remain arrested in the approximate" (*LH* 527). In Atget, Benjamin finds a like-minded commitment to "literality" or *Wörtlichkeit,* a question his photography poses as the disappearance of the figure or the evacuation of presence. If for Benjamin photography's proper genre is portraiture, Atget discovers an antinomic principle within it. "He initiates the emancipation of object from aura" (*LH* 518); his photographs "suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship" (518); or finally, "He reached the Pole of utmost mastery; but with the bitter modesty of a great craftsman who always lives in the shadows, he neglected to plant his flag there"(518).

[20] All well and good with the exception of Atget's "bitter modesty," his status as "a great craftsman" and his "always liv[ing] in the shadows," all of which should catch our attention. For if the presence of the figure is evacuated, this virtuoso of the mechanical medium is unable to rid photography of the lyric subject; he "always lives in the shadows." The pressure Benjamin places Atget's practice under is barely felt, but it points to the crucial aspect of Benjamin's own afflicted aesthetic. Following Benjamin, this author of his own demise, we might rightly repeat the rhetorical question he asks of Atget—"But shouldn't a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate?" (*LH* 527) Substituting writer for photographer and writing for pictures, Benjamin should pose this to himself: "But shouldn't a *writer* who cannot read his own *writing* be no less accounted an illiterate?" This puts us in Benjamin's shoes, and it proves a treacherous bind indeed, for it speaks to the conditions of possibility in modernity itself … a modernity that Benjamin called, "the time of hell" (Clark 9).

[i] See especially Rodolphe Gasché, "Objective Diversions: On Some Kantian Themes in Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience,* A. Benjamin, P. Osborne, eds. (London, 2000), 180-201.

[ii] Carol Jacobs, "The Monstrosity of Translation," in *The Language of Walter Benjamin*, (Baltimore, 1999)*.* Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 144; Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. A. Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 48-57; T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 1-13.

[iii] Of Greyfriars cemetery, Benjamin writes: "But this setting could never have been so effective if it had not been chosen on technical grounds. The low light-sensitivity of the early plates made prolonged exposure outdoors a necessity" (*LH* 514). Further, "And once again the technical equivalent is obvious: it consists in the absolute continuum from brightest light to darkest shadow (*LH* 517).

[iv] Thus, of Benjamin's "Task of the Translator" Paul de Man writes "The dimension of futurity, for example, which is present in it, is not temporal but is the correlative of the figural pattern and the disjunctive power which Benjamin locates in the structure of language. History, as Benjamin conceives it, is certainly not messianic, since it consists in the rigorous separation and the acting out of the separation of the sacred from the poetic…*Reine Sprache…*has nothing in common with poetic language…It is within this negative knowledge of its relation to the language of the scared that poetic language initiates. It is, if you want, a necessarily nihilistic moment that is necessary in any understanding of history" (De Man, *Conclusions* 92).

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Review of readings for History of Photography midterm. Readings listed in order they appear on syllabus and are followed by brief summary. Readings from B… Review of all readings for History of Photography final exam. Readings are listed in order they appear on syllabus and are followed by brief summary. Readings from Bate are taken directly from the text and important readings are starred (*). To review readings assigned after the midterm, please visit: https://quizlet.com/174871398/flashcards. Review of all readings for History of Photography final exam. Date - Sept 8-13. Little History of Photography - Walter Benjamin. Benjamin briefly discussed the origins of photography in science and art. Steiner Benjamin's "Little History" 2. The illiteracy of the future,' someone has said, will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography. -Walter Benjamin. A title that stutters does not auger well, but then the deeply counter-intuitive work of Walter Benjamin puts logic and language under considerable strain. The case of Benjamin's "Little History of Photography" (1931) is exemplary. [2] The first that strikes the reader of Benjamin's text is why would he write a "Little History of Photography? Is it a symptom? Why little when questions as large as the "illiteracy of the future" are posed? Little History of Photography · 5 1 5. trammg as craftsmen that we have to thank for the high level of their photographic achievement. This transitional generation disappeared very gradually; indeed, there seems to have been a kind of biblical blessing on those first photographers: the Nadars, Stelzners, Piersons, Bayards all lived well into their eighties and nineties. ' First it was pillars, or curtains. " The most capable started resisting this nonsense as early as the 1 8 60s. As an English trade journal of the time put it, "in painting the pillar has some plausibility, but the way it is used in photography is absurd, since it usually stands on a carpet. But anyone can see that pillars of marble or stone are not erected on a foundation of carpeting.