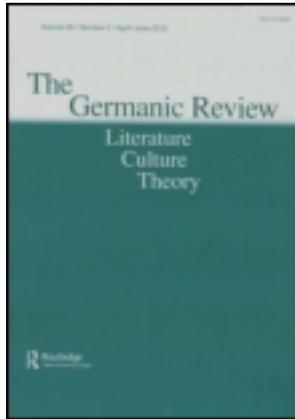


This article was downloaded by: [James McFarland]

On: 03 October 2012, At: 10:27

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vger20>

One-Way Street: Childhood and Improvisation at the Close of the Book

James McFarland ^a

^a Vanderbilt University

Version of record first published: 12 Sep 2012.

To cite this article: James McFarland (2012): One-Way Street: Childhood and Improvisation at the Close of the Book, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 87:3, 293-303

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2012.704339>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

One-Way Street: Childhood and Improvisation at the Close of the Book

James McFarland

Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street* emerges from a profoundly subversive orientation in his thought. It is the application in the present of a skeptical posture toward the European cultural legacy, a skeptical posture typical of Benjamin in his relation to the university institution. The proximity of *One-Way Street* to disruptions in the processes securing cultural transmission appears in the transformation of the book's relation to Gershom Scholem and Asja Lacis, the antithetical colleagues closest to Benjamin at the time he wrote it. The satirical force originally associated with his student friend Scholem and their shared parody the "University of Muri" gives way to an ever greater sensitivity to childhood per se as a principle of counter-experience, a sensitivity Benjamin found embodied in Asja Lacis's proletarian children's theater. At the intersection of the satiric university that debunks all prior authority and the proletarian children's theater that vests an unexpected pedagogic potency in the future generation, *One-Way Street* gestures toward everything adult authority necessarily obliterates and by which it must eventually be obliterated in turn.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, Asja Lacis, Muri, *One-Way Street*, revolutionary pedagogy

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University contains one of the few remaining copies of Gershom Scholem's "*Amtliches Lehrgedicht*," his "Official Didactic Poem," a satire first written in 1918 but brought to print a decade later. The library's catalogue lists the publisher as "Muri: Verlag der Universität, [1928]." The mistake is understandable; this is what the book itself lists on its title page, just before the dedication to "His/Magnificence/WALTER BENJAMIN/Rector of the Universität Muri." But just as Benjamin was never rector of an actual university, so there never was a University of Muri Press, and the book, a mock children's alphabet in which the rhymed quatrains attending each letter satirize figures and themes in the contemporary intellectual landscape, was issued privately by Scholem's father, the printer Arthur Scholem, in a print run of 250.

Muri is the small Swiss town in which Scholem and Benjamin had briefly lived during the war, its university the satirical invention of the two iconoclastic and impassioned students. Scholem explains: “Since so little was to be learned at the university, we formed ‘our own academy’ (as Benjamin put it in our first conversations). Thus we proceeded to found, half in earnest and half in jest, the ‘University of Muri’ and its ‘institutes’: a library and an academy. In the catalogue of this university, the statutes of the academy, and the imaginary list of new library accessions, for which Benjamin supplied reviews sparkling with wit, our high spirits and ridicule of academic activities found an appropriate outlet during the next three or four years. Benjamin played the role of the rector and repeatedly gave me written and oral reports about the latest goings-on at our fantasy university. I was heard from as ‘Warder of the School of the Philosophy of Religion’ and sometimes also as a member of the faculty.”¹

What survives of Muri survives in the archive; with the exception of Scholem’s *Lehrgedicht*, the only Muri-designated texts that appeared in print during Benjamin’s lifetime were two of the parodic book reviews that were published in an early issue of Willy Haas’s *Literarische Welt*, one of Benjamin’s primary venues in the second half of the Weimar Republic. The university comes down to us in the many references in Benjamin’s correspondence with Scholem in the early 1920s, as well as in two handwritten groups of mock book reviews and a typescript, the “Acta Muriensa,” that Benjamin seems to have had prepared (he himself did not type) in 1923.² But if Muri never reached an actual public, real publication of the fantasy was always a possibility, as we know from several efforts Benjamin made in this direction. This possibility makes of Muri, at least from Benjamin’s perspective, something more than simply a private joke. The university proceedings took place within the friendship between Benjamin and Scholem; Muri commemorated their closest physical and intellectual proximity, and it served in their correspondence as a common reference that reestablished an intimacy repeatedly interrupted by diverging personal circumstances and attitudes. (“Upon the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the founding of the University of Muri, which is scheduled to be celebrated in the coming year,” Benjamin writes to Scholem in 1923, “a festschrift will appear. ‘Memento Muri,’ for which contributions are requested.”³) But where Scholem recalls Muri as the appropriately private outlet for the disappointments and frustrations occasioned by a public institution, Benjamin’s attempts to bring Muri before a wider public indicate that for him the parodic university entertained an autonomous relation to a public sphere.

¹Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin—Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), 76. Translated by Harry Zohn under the title of *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1981), 72. Hereafter cited as GF and SF with page numbers.

²Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. 7 Vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980–1991), 4: 1016–17. Hereafter cited as GS with volume and page number.

³Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 5 vols., ed. Christoph Gösde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1999), 2: 389 (hereafter cited as GB with volume and page number). Selections translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson as *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 222 (hereafter cited as C with page number).

The slight disavowal detectable in Scholem's recollection results in part from the fact that Muri emerges from the hoary tradition of European student humor, and is tied thereby to the novice's preliminary, subaltern position. By the time Scholem is writing *The Story of a Friendship* in 1975, that is all far in his past. For Benjamin at the time, on the other hand, the subaltern origins of Muri make it a natural continuation of his earlier student advocacy of an exemplary youth. His student humor arises out of a "life of students" in the hypertrophic sense Benjamin had given the phrase in 1914, in his farewell to university activism with that title. The gleefully disrespectful posture toward the weight of tradition made possible by the student's inconsequential status in the transmission of culture becomes, for Benjamin, the stand-in for a radically discontinuous relation between language and truth outside the public systems of accreditation. In these same years Benjamin would describe Gottfried Keller's deeply subversive humor as a "'dubious' system of grottoes and caverns that by imperceptible stages tends—the more deeply it enters into Keller himself—to constrain and ultimately to repress the rhythmic babble of bourgeois voices and opinions in favor of the cosmic rhythms it captures within the bowels of the earth."⁴ The possibility of Muri, reflected in the titles and mottos and ceremonies that manifest the non-authority of the texts it produces, responds to the cosmic rhythms of a deeply serious level in Benjamin's thought.⁵

This too is why the energies Muri channels eventually flow into the book Benjamin wrote simultaneously with his academic *Habilitation*, as its formal antithesis. "My work is keeping me busy enough for the time being," he recounts to Scholem in December 1924.

It is more urgent for me to tell you that I hope to bring Muri to the attention of the public within the framework of a pastoral fantasy. I am preparing (as a private printing or as a publication to be offered for sale) "Plaquette for Friends." (In France a plaquette is a narrow, brochurelike, short, special issue containing poems or something similar—a bookdealer's terminus technicus.) I intend to collect my aphorisms, witticisms, and dreams in several chapters, each of which will carry the name of someone close to me as its only heading. And Muri would unfold under your name. (C 257; GB 2: 510)

⁴Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. 4 Vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 2: 54. Hereafter cited as SW with volume and page number. GS 2: 287.

⁵Thus, to the much-commented-upon texts of Benjamin's on the status of theology in his thought, N7a,7 in the *Arcades Project*—"My thinking is related to theology as blotting pad is related to ink" (GS 5: 588; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999], 471; hereafter cited in the text as AP with page number)—and the first of the *Theses on the Concept of History*, where the wizened dwarf theology animates the chess machine of historical materialism, should doubtless be added Benjamin's Muri review of the travel writer Theodor Däubler's nonexistent *Athos and the Atheists*, which reveals, on the basis of "fragmentary inscriptions from Athos, undeniable archeological testimonies, deciphered painstakingly from weathered slabs" that "the Atheists—that is, 'Those from Athos'—were a sect of ardent ecstasies formerly resident all over the island, second to none in the bitterness of their self-chastisements, who were denounced in the 11th century by a scribe in the pay of the Greek patriarch Euthymios on the basis of vulgar Greek and no doubt intentionally falsified etymology with the name of deniers of God and thereby delivered over to the persecutions of the authorities" (GS 4: 442–43).

“Plaquette for Friends” is the earliest incarnation of what would become *One-Way Street*. The title and the schema Benjamin here describes situate the proposed effort outside of the recognizable genres organizing historical traditions. The foreign word “plaquette” designates a particular sort of physical object and not a particular form of traditional writing. By resorting to this term, Benjamin enables a distinction between the work as a closed and permanent identity and the book as an open and perishable thing. In terms of significant closure, even a genre as formally indeterminate as “aphorism” captures only part of what this plaquette will preserve; there will be jokes and dreams as well. This diversity of expressive forms is held together not by the significant closure of a work but in the pluralized gesture of dedication within a preexisting circle of friends. At this point publication remains potentially limited to a private printing. In the event, it was Rowohlt Verlag that published what in crucial senses must be considered Benjamin’s central text, once these personal nominal subtitles had mutated into their opposite extreme, headings sampling the entirely anonymous language of the metropolitan street. But in its initial conception *One-Way Street* bore the antinomian imprimatur of the University of Muri Press.

The plan of the plaquette for friends imagines a plurality of dedications inscribed into the structure of the text. A subsequent letter to Scholem repeats the description of the project: “There in a number of chapters, over each of which nothing but a name will stand, will be brought my humorous or profound or useful insights [*Einfälle*] and beneath ‘Gerhard Scholem’ Muri will be presented.” And Benjamin continues rather coyly: “Moreover the pretty plan has caused me for obvious reasons a fair amount of head-scratching with regard to the headings” (GB 3: 16). A reader might speculate, but Benjamin says nothing concrete about other correlations. What philology has is a historical trajectory that passes from this initial constellation of Scholem and Muri exemplifying a plural dedication to the eventual dedication of the entire aphorism book to Asja Lacis. That *One-Way Street* can be situated between the rival claims of Asja and Gershom is a hermeneutic and not a biographical hypothesis. To retrace that trajectory and so comprehend what is at stake in *One-Way Street*, we must pursue the dimension of Benjamin’s thought that links this original dedication of Muri to Scholem with the eventual dedication of *One-Way Street* to Lacis.

However closely associated Muri may have been in Benjamin’s mind with Gershom Scholem, in the end he did not include the parody in *One-Way Street*. Rather, a different text of Benjamin’s preserved the connection to his friend, a *Scheltrede* or excoriation of the Germans written in response to a journey through the country in early 1923, as the national currency was inflating to unprecedented dimensions. If Muri’s subaltern mockery preserves the echo of a utopian alternative to contemporary conditions, KAISERPANORAMA is animated entirely by Benjamin’s passionate hostility to those conditions. Indeed, Scholem would remark about this text, an earlier version of which Benjamin had given to him upon his emigration to Palestine in September of 1923, “It was hard for me to understand what could keep a man who had written this in Germany” (SF 145; GF 151). The fact that Benjamin would give Scholem this text at such a significant juncture in their relationship testifies to its association in his mind with the durable negative condition of their friendship: their common hatred of the society into which they had matured. The shared rejection of contemporary Germany, which Scholem expressed by actually leaving the country and its continental context behind, was the aspect of the friendship that Benjamin chose to commemorate in *One-Way Street*.

KAISERPANORAMA recommended itself as Scholem's representative in *One-Way Street* not only because with its contemporary focus and fragmentary form this aphoristic sequence was in many ways an early version of the gesture the entire book would become. More fundamentally both for Benjamin's later development and for an understanding of the aphorism book as a whole, KAISERPANORAMA supplanted Muri because, while the emphatic repudiation of the commercialized modern world continued to link Benjamin with his friend, his own positive alternative to that world—the alternative that Muri briefly evoked—was moving in a very different direction from Scholem's scholarly embrace of Judaism and its sublime history. Where Scholem would, so to speak, realize an adult, authoritative version of Muri in the Hebrew University by genuinely applying the most rigorous scholarly techniques to scorned and despised heresies and countertraditions of Jewish history, Benjamin was taking a different lesson from Muri out of the academy entirely. Rather than transposing Muri's antiauthority into authoritative scholarship on apocryphal traditions, Benjamin chose to emphasize precisely the radical anti-traditionalist posture of the Murian academy as an engagement with the contemporary world and its destiny.

The Acta Muriensa typescript preserves in its outline rather more of the structure of the University of Muri than do the isolated indices in the handwritten legacy. In particular, it preserves the "*Portalsspruch*," the lapidary inscription over the gate of Muri. It is not any version of *Lasciate ogne speranza* but the altered opening of a well-known nursery rhyme: *lirum larum Löffelstiel, kleine Kinder fragen viel*. It might be rendered into English as "lirum larum lobsterpot, little children ask a lot" (GS 4: 441). The traditional children's rhyme that this motto distorts, at least as it is preserved in the Romantic anthology *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, does not refer to children who ask a lot but old women who eat a lot. *Lirum larum Löffelstiel, alte Weiber essen viel*. Benjamin has changed the motto above Muri's gate to mark a reflexive limit, introducing the figure of the curious child into the childlike voice of the nonsense rhyme itself. The perspective of the child, borne by the proximity to meaningless and infantile nonsense of the first half of the line, converges with the perspective on the child, held steady in the descriptive statement of the line's second half. The gate of Muri stands at the limit marked by this inversion, the limit at which the child's curiosity distinguishes itself from the adult perspective that acknowledges it at some mnemonic or imaginative distance from mature communication. The child's nonsensical voice is correlated with a persistent questionability on the surface of the communicable world itself that no answer will ever ultimately satisfy. The parodic relation to university institutions is correlated with this deeper opposition between childhood and adulthood, here figured as an interrogatory relation on a boundary with nonsense.

The questionability at stake in childish interrogation is perpetually reactivated and overcome by the encounter between generations. This means on the one hand that the child's questions are not just any questions but are juvenile precisely to the extent that they re-traverse an adult self-evidence, flush out as explanation and its limits an operative adult understanding. Unlike Heidegger's inauthentic "*Neugier*," vacuous because "it seeks novelty only to leap from it anew to another novelty,"⁶ the insatiable curiosity of the child concerns

⁶Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), 16th edition (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986), 172. Translated under the title *Being and Time*, by Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 161.

what from an adult perspective has been practically internalized, is old and known to the limits of its relevance. This curiosity too is vacuous, but not because it has lost contact with genuine content. It is vacuous because it has not yet achieved communicable content; its interrogative posture is not simply turned toward the new but preempts adulthood as a communicable condition. As such, it is in individual existential terms certainly immature but hardly inauthentic. Since the inauthenticity of Heideggerian *Neugier* rests in its evasion of ecstatic future possibility in a present constituted as already experienced and forgotten,⁷ childish interrogation lacks even the condition of such inauthenticity, a forgotten past. In existential terms childish interrogation is inessential because it is transient, destined to succumb to the mere duration that is the very possibility of authenticity or inauthenticity. But in fact to see it existentially is already distorted, for only at the collective level, as a generational encounter, is this interrogative relation philosophically durable. This *perennial* confrontation between adult experience and childish curiosity that characterizes collective life is never entirely congruent with either childhood or adulthood as states of the individual. As phases of mortal life, adulthood and childhood illuminate experience only when this discrepancy is provisionally captured by a duplication of one phase within the other, either in the child's fantasy of adulthood or in the adult's memory of childhood.⁸ The irreversible one-way street of time precludes any ultimate symmetry between these duplications; the temporal precedence of childhood before adulthood necessarily surrenders to the mortal priority of adult sobriety over childish astonishment. Yet this priority that death inscribes into individual adulthood disappears from the perennial confrontation at the collective level.

⁷“Curiosity is altogether inauthentically futural, in such a way that it does not await a *possibility* but in its greed only desires possibility as something real. Curiosity is constituted by a dispersed making present that, only making present, thus constantly tries to run away from the awaiting in which it is nevertheless ‘held,’ although in a dispersed way” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 318). “Die Neugier ist ganz und gar uneigentlich zukünftig und dies wiederum dergestalt, daß sie nicht einer *Möglichkeit* gewärtig ist, sondern diese schon nur noch als Wirkliches in ihrer Gier begehrt. Die Neugier wird konstituiert durch ein ungehaltenes Gegenwärtigen, das, nur gegenwärtigend, damit ständig dem Gewärtigen, darin es doch ungehalten gehalten’ ist, zu entlaufen sucht” (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 347).

⁸It is upon this volatile fissure in communicable experience, the fissure between adult and child as it is mnemonically incorporated into adult awareness, that Benjamin's autobiographical *Berlin Childhood around 1900* is constructed. Indeed, that text can be seen as a complement to *One-Way Street*, most visibly in the common inclusion of important sections called “*Kaiserpanorama*,” one of which *describes* a *Kaiserpanorama* and the other of which *is* a *Kaiserpanorama*. This contrast, a mnemonic dislocation that objectifies and names phenomena in *Berlin Childhood* that are directly evoked in *One-Way Street*, governs the entire relation between these texts. *One-Way Street* is a Berlin street without ever *naming* Berlin, while *Berlin Childhood* is centrally concerned with the evocative mnemonic power of referential names. This dislocation, however, is far too complicated to be addressed in the present essay, and we do well to recall Benjamin's emphatic remark to Gretel Karplus on 16 August 1935, in which he emphasizes that his work on the Parisian arcades, work that emerges directly from the presentational strategies of *One-Way Street*, must hold the mnemonic register of *Berlin Childhood* at arms length: “It is precisely this book [i.e., *The Arcades Project*] that may not anywhere lay any claim to forms such as those offered to me by my *Berlin Childhood*. . . . The Ur-history of the nineteenth century reflected in the vision of the child playing on its doorstep has a totally different countenance than that in the signs that they engrave on the map of history” (C 507; GB 5: 144).

As an aspect of collective existence, childhood in its potential represents an inevitable triumph over perishing adulthood. It is this collective progressive potential, oriented in direct opposition to the movement of cultural transmission between generations, that Benjamin attempts to realize in *One-Way Street*.

Muri as an academic satire disappears from *One-Way Street* because the localized institutional framework of academic work, the university, has in the meantime lost its relevance for Benjamin's thought. The antithetical impulse that the University of Muri documents survives in Benjamin not, as in Scholem, by reconciling itself with the adult university and the intellectual discipline it promotes in order to integrate neglected heretical traditions into enlightened scholarship. The university retains in Benjamin's thought no particular status as a context for intellectual work. Rather, the satiric and immature challenge to traditional cultural transmission Muri represents expands to encompass the full scope of intergenerational relations, introducing into them a radical counter-impulse, one that inverts the hierarchies through which culture is handed down to the future. This transformed pedagogic situation finds its appropriate physical setting at the point where the academic lectern subverts and is subverted by the theatrical stage—the point at which Benjamin would eventually encounter Brecht's epic theater. But only years after he had discovered its potential through Asja Lacin.

One of the experiences Benjamin found so compelling in Lacin's earlier life was, she tells us, her organization of a children's theater in 1919 in the revolutionary city of Oryol, Russia. "Already in Capri in 1924 Walter Benjamin had heard of my children's theater," she reports in her 1971 memoir, "and shown an extraordinary interest in it."⁹ Some five years later, after living together in Berlin and toward the end of their love affair, Benjamin composed "A Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," the fourth and final of the documents that register theoretically this encounter between Walter and Asja, after the festive collaboration on the travel essay "Naples," the exultant dedication of *One-Way Street*, and the melancholy Moscow Diary. "The Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater" is in a sense a return to the origins of the love affair, Benjamin's theoretical articulation of a practice that was already part of Asja's history when he had met her in Capri. In 1919, Lacin had responded to a sudden terrible glut of homeless urban orphans left behind by war and revolution by organizing them into theatrical troops. "You could not remain indifferent to it," Lacin reported years later. "I had to do something, and I understood that children's songs and nursery rhymes wouldn't be enough. To draw them from their lethargy there had to be a task that could grab them *entirely* and unlock their traumatized abilities. I knew what incredible power resided in theatrical performance" (Lacin 21–22; GS 2: 1491–92). The children's theater that Lacin organized thus had therapeutic purposes. It encountered children expressly prior to their practical educations, aiming not to orient them in adult terms but to return the substantial freedom of childhood to them as the only condition of humane maturation. It did not coach the children to perform preexisting scripts but was structured around principles of improvisation and observation.

⁹Lacin, Asja. *Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator*, ed. Hildegard Brenner (München: Rogner & Bernhard, 1971), 25–26 (quoted in GS 2: 1495).

The children observed things, their relations to one another and their alterability; the educators observed the children, seeing what they had managed to do and to what extent they had employed their abilities productively. We practiced observation not only in the studio, promoting it with drawing, painting, music-making; we also practiced it out of doors. Early in the morning and again in the evening we would go outside with the children and draw their attention to the way that colors changed because of distance and time of day, how differently tones and noises sounded mornings and evenings, and that the silence can sing. (Lacis 23; GS 2: 1493)

As Lacis recounts the story, the children's theater is part of a larger Soviet administrative process in which adult public authorities were responding to immediate need, providing the necessities of food, shelter, and clothing to children whom historical catastrophe had jettisoned from any intimate, familial protection. Despite the Soviet state orphanages, these children struck Lacis as demoralized and hopeless. They "had food to eat, were dressed cleanly and had a roof over their heads, but they looked like old men and women: weary, sad eyes, nothing interested them. Children without childhood" (Lacis 21; GS 2: 1491). The task of the children's theater was thus to restore their childhood spontaneity and reactivity, to emancipate the children's abilities rather than to inculcate them with ideological content. "The goal of communist education is to set free productivity on the basis of a high general level of culture, and this by special as well as ordinary talents" (Lacis 23; GS 2: 1493).

For Lacis, who herself came from a proletarian background, the congruence of communism and the emancipation of childhood was axiomatic. It is precisely this congruence that Benjamin's "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater" theoretically articulates. Yet by articulating it, Benjamin renders this relationship prescriptive. Not children but the proletarian movement is at stake in the pedagogic relationship. "Every proletarian movement, whenever it has for once escaped the format of parliamentary debate, finds itself confronting many different forces for which it is unprepared. The most powerful of these, as well as the most dangerous, is the younger generation" (SW 2: 201; GS 2: 763). The intuitive precedence of adult over child is challenged by this inverted power of child over adult. The younger generation is powerful simply because of time; they supplant the adult generation with an unconquerable inevitability that owes nothing to their intentions in a strategic conflict. Precisely this, the unintentional irresistibility of even a cooperative youth, the fact that the young, whatever else they may be, are avatars of mortal time itself, is what makes them not only unexpected but dangerous to a collective adult movement such as revolutionary communism, one that aims to exist beyond the support of extant public institutions and for the sake of abolishing them. Parliamentary debate, the binding negotiation in terms of mutually recognizable self-interest of common public concerns, epitomizes those institutions and defines tautologically an exclusively adult milieu. The normative definition of adult competence is the ability to enter voluntarily into precisely the kinds of binding agreements that are mediated by parliamentary debate. To the extent that the proletarian movement is understood exclusively in terms of its participation in or resistance to this kind of parliamentary communication, which means to the extent that it is essentially incarnated as a political party, it will be semantically circumscribed by an exclusively adult language. The language that is used

in such debate manifests recognizable adult significance, is organized around meanings that constrain the responsible speaker from without, as impersonal semantic content.

The very independence of adult semantic content from the circumstances—intentional and unintentional—of its original articulation means such binding public language is prone to degenerate into catchphrases. But “mere catchphrases have no power over children” (SW 2: 201; GS 2: 763). This is not because the child has a greater penetration into the truth of things. It is because the *Phrase*, the catchphrase or empty phrase, is ultimately constituted, whatever its local semantic content might be, from something inaccessible to the child in the most quantitative terms: repetition. In this the *Phrase* is akin to Heidegger’s *Neugier*. The empty phrase, Benjamin says in his great essay on Karl Kraus, is an excrescence [*Ausgeburt*] of technology, of the technological organization of language in mass distribution. Mechanical reproduction inhabits the empty phrase, which is propagated into so many different copies that any intrinsic relation to the circumstances in which it was originally intended and articulated is hugely attenuated. Each further repetition and promotion usurps the intended content for the sake of other localized purposes, repeats the old phrase in new circumstances. It is this repetition and recognition beyond immediate vital circumstances that constitutes the empty phrase as a mode of communication. The very fact that the child has not lived long enough to internalize this automatic, alienated dimension of language means that he or she cannot perceive the catchphrase as catchphrase. The child’s reaction to the catchphrase is an opportunity for the educator who is observing the child to recognize the clichéd and conventionalized aspects of his or her own attitudes. The children’s theater is a *theater* and not a school precisely because of this externalizing inversion that characterizes its operation. A proletarian children’s theater is not, for Benjamin, an institution where the proletariat educate children but rather an institution in which children educate the proletariat.

But the revolutionary significance of this proletarian children’s theater militates against any institutional embodiment. This can be seen in the essay on Naples that Benjamin wrote together with Asja Lacis in 1924. It begins with a sardonic account of “an international congress of philosophers” that appeared in the city to participate in the “seventh-centennial celebration of the university . . . amid the uproar of a popular festival.” These academic guests are “summarily relieved of their money and identification papers” (SW 1: 415; GS 4: 307–08); Naples is far too fluid and porous to succumb to the earnest categories of academic philosophy. “Porosity” is, indeed, the dominant theme of Benjamin and Lacis’s description of the city, and this interpenetration of old and new, sacred and secular, legal and illegal, rich and poor, is what renders Naples such a strangely paradisaical place. “Porosity results not only from the indolence of the southern artisan,” the authors observe,

but also, above all, from the passion for improvisation, which demands that space and opportunity be preserved at any price. Buildings are used as a popular stage. They are all divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theaters. . . . Even the most wretched pauper is sovereign in the dim, dual awareness of participating, in all his destitution, in one of the pictures of Neapolitan street life that will never return, and of enjoying in all his poverty the leisure to follow the great panorama. (SW 1: 416–17; GS 4: 310)

The improvisation and observation that the proletarian children practice is thus not simply a theatrical practice but shares with the Neapolitan environment this radical porosity, in which child and adult, pauper and sovereign, and ultimately reader and writer are constantly changing roles. This perpetual inversion of roles, the “*dumpfes Doppelwissen*” in which one is both audience and performer, is *reading* in the sense that *One-Way Street* is designed to provoke. Where traditional writing distributes initiative to the author and reactivity to the reader, *One-Way Street* attempts to provide “space and opportunity at any cost” for the reader to assert unexpected initiative, and for the authorial position—not Benjamin in his mortal limitation but the textual authority he provisionally embodies—to be transformed and updated. The many children who scamper up and down Asja-Lacis-Street embody this potential for unexpected initiative. Early in the book, in CHINESE CURIOS, a child cannot be persuaded to greet the arriving visitor until, having washed, he presents himself naked; the figure resonates allegorically with the text itself encountering the reader. In TECHNICAL AID, much later in the book, a child plays a similarly allegorical role, only here representing the text as it resists its author, who is likened to a photographer beneath the black cloth, trying to coax a likeness from the child. In CONSTRUCTION SITE and STAMP COLLECTION, the child is an alien point of awareness, a foreign perception of the world of things. And of course it is the multipart aphorism ENLARGEMENTS that brings the figure of the child most emphatically and yet elusively to the fore. These six subtitled texts can be read as explorations of the limits of the German impersonal pronoun “*man*.” Whether standing for the depersonalized child himself, as in the first sentence of “Child Reading” (“One [*man*] receives a book from the school library”), or for the generalized adult world, as in “Belated Child” (“Or all is silent, as if they [*man*] were waiting for someone”), the unexpressed assumptions about human existence that silently inhabit the *man* are what these aphorisms enlarge.¹⁰

In a letter to Scholem from February of 1925, in which Benjamin describes his culminating work on *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*, he remarks about that treatise: “This project marks an end for me—I would not have it be a beginning for any money in the world” (C 261; GB 3: 15). Benjamin is speaking specifically of a scholarly focus on the Baroque, but the terminus here captures as well a contrast with *One-Way Street*. From its second aphorism, BREAKFAST ROOM, which “warns against recounting dreams the next morning on an empty stomach,” *One-Way Street* expressly thematizes beginning, in particular the transit of awakening, the lurch into that attitude for which dreams, recalled, display beyond the verisimilitude of their experience the ceaseless strangeness that reveals them as dreams. To dream is to be in thrall to the dream; awakened we are freed to acknowledge its oneiric aura. *One-Way Street* displays so many dream protocols in order to evoke that tincture of strangeness available only to a “beyond of the dream” [*Jenseits vom Traum*], by definition outside the of the dream spell. “Only from the far bank, from broad daylight, may dream be addressed from the superior vantage of memory” (SW 1: 445; GS 4: 86; WuN 8: 12). Wakefulness has no positive contour but serves merely as the figure in subjective terms for an emancipated state whose objective correlate is human maturity. Maturity, too,

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 8, *Einbahnstraße*, ed. Detlev Schöttker (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 40–44. Hereafter cited in the text as WuN with volume and page number. SW 1: 463–66; GS 4: 113–16.

is not positively instantiated but rather reactively provoked by the unexpected gesture of the child.

Benjamin's own adult academic treatise *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*, central as its themes may be to his theoretical grasp of the world, does not display his fundamental communicative practice. It is rather *One-Way Street* in its proximity to the University of Muri and the Proletarian Children's Theater that points the way forward for Benjamin. At the most immediate level, the discontinuous trajectory of an urban street characterizes the *Arcades Project* that comes to organize all of Benjamin's subsequent thought, though that street is enclosed by an artificial ceiling and displaced into the nineteenth century. But beyond these differences, *One-Way Street* and the *Arcades Project* exhibit a profound technical antithesis. The *Arcades Project* cites; in its primordial and disintegrated form it consists largely of citations, and Benjamin's methodological notes there speak of an aspiration "to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks" (AP 458; GS 5: 572). *One-Way Street*, on the other hand, very rarely cites other writers. Where Benjamin does, it is in the form of epigraphs (NUMBER 113, MEXICAN EMBASSY, NUMBER 13) or, exceptionally, Goethe (STATIONERS) and Lichtenberg (TAX ADVICE). The quotation of Karl Kraus's self-characterization in MONUMENT TO A WARRIOR anticipates the emphasis Benjamin will later put on Kraus's own citational practice in the essay "Karl Kraus." With the exception of these three signed citations, Benjamin uses quotation marks in *One-Way Street* to identify sayings that often cannot be attributed to any specific person: "Genius is application" (SW 1 446; GS 4: 88; WuN 8: 14), "On this sofa the aunt cannot but be murdered" (SW 1: 447; GS 4: 89; WuN 8: 15), "Poverty disgraces no man" (SW 1: 452; GS 4: 96; WuN 8: 23). These are, of course, empty phrases, anonymous clichés that childlike reactions are meant to unmask. But if *One-Way Street* is chary of citing other writers, its aphoristic compression has contributed one of Benjamin's most cited sentences *about* citation, from the text HARDWARE: "Citations in my work are like the wayside robbers who leap out, armed, and relieve the idle stroller of his conviction" (SW 2: 481; GS 4: 138; WuN 67). The citability of such expressions rests precisely in the unprecedented quality of the images they mobilize. The citable text, as opposed to the repeated phrase, the text that strikes the reader with the force that changing colors and singing silence strike the questioning child, a text that cannot be institutionalized into a somber pedagogic procedure but that lingers outside the received categories of communication: This is Benjamin's ideal and to a great extent his achievement in *One-Way Street*, a spur to emancipated consciousness at the close of the book.

Vanderbilt University